

Sermons Preached by the Rev. Raymond Shaheen, D. D.

<u>Year:1976</u>	<u>SERMON TITLE</u>	<u>TEXT</u>
January 4, 1976	"Christians Are The Christmas People"	
January 11, 1976	"What It's All About"	Acts 10:35
January 25, 1976	"Ananias, The Magnanimous"	Acts 9: 10-19
February 8, 1976	"When Chance Dictates Choice"	Luke 10: 30
February 15, 1976	"Against Prevailing Currents"	Matthew 5: 38-49
February 22, 1976	"On Finding God Incredible"	Acts 12: 15
March 7, 1976	"God's Man for The Road"	Luke 18: 31
March 14, 1976	"Fellow-Traveler: Peter"	Mark 14: 29-31
March 21, 1976	"God's Man-On-The Road — Fellow Traveler: Andrew"	
March 25, 1976	Meditation	
March 28, 1976	"God's Man-On-The Road: John"	John 19: 26
April 4, 1976	"Fellow Traveler: A Man Named Judas Iscariot"	John 18: 5
April 18, 1976	"The Easter Rush"	
April 25, 1976	"How Jesus Christ Become Real"	
May 2, 1976	"What If---?"	
May 9, 1976	"Three-Of-A-Kind"	II Timothy 6: 7
May 16, 1976	"Common Commitment"	Romans 2: 4
May 23, 1976	"All Things Good and Holy"	
May 30, 1976	"Mission Accomplished"	
June 6, 1976	"It Didn't Just happen"	

<u>1976- continued</u>	<u>SERMON TITLE</u>	<u>TEXT</u>
June 6, 1976	"Be Thou faithful"	
June 13, 1976	"Everything— Why Now?"	
June 20, 1976	"Troubles-- Problems"	
June 27, 1976	"No Greater Responsibility"	
June 27, 1976	"A Silent Christ"	Luke 23: 9
July 4, 1976	"A Nation Under God"	
July 11, 1976	"On Being Afraid"	Mark 4: 40
July 18, 1976	"To Live Peaceably"	
August 1, 1976	"Now Never Comes Again"	
August 8 1976	"On Getting Along With Yourself"	Genesis 32: 24
August 15, 1976	"Mary, Mother of Our Lord"	
August 22, 1976	"A Diet Of Our Soul"	
September 5, 1976	"The Tonic Of A Wholesome Pride"	Nehemiah 6: 11
September 12, 1976	"Brooding Optimist"	II Peter 1:19
September 19, 1976	"A Letter To People In A Wicked City"	I Corinthians 10: 13
September 26, 1976	"To See One's Self"	Matthew 15: 27
October 10, 1976	"To See Our Blessings"	
October 17, 1976	"Festival Of Praise"	
November 7, 1976	"A Favored People"	
November 14, 1976	"An Adequate Philosophy Of Life"	I Peter 4: 10
November 21, 1976	"No Borrowed Creed"	

<u>1976- continued</u>	<u>SERMON TITLE</u>	<u>TEXT</u>
November 28, 1976	"Circle Of Love: Joseph- A Just Man"	—
December 5, 1976	"Circle Of Love: Mary"	—
December 12, 1976	"Circle Of Love: Shepherds"	—
December 19, 1976	"Circle Of Love: Wise Men"	—
December 24, 1976	Untitled	—
December 24, 1976	Untitled	—

"CHRISTIANS ARE THE CHRISTMAS PEOPLE"

WE NEED to do, Heavenly Father, the kind of thing that we're about to do now, to give some measure of attention to the interpretation of Your Word. We ask Your blessing not only upon the preacher, but upon him who hears. So, then, let Your Holy Spirit lay hold upon all of us. In the Name of Jesus Christ, Who when He came, came preaching. Amen.

Every now and then a preacher comes upon a turn of words, a phrase or an expression he considers quite apt. Chances are that he'll want to use it again, and ever so often. It could well be now, that after listening to this voice for two decades, you've done your share of reciting, with a degree of amusement, some of the expressions you've heard from this pulpit -- repeatedly. Well let me make bold to add, and quite deliberately, another one to your list. Here it is: "CHRISTIANS ARE THE CHRISTMAS PEOPLE."

If it was said once it was said at least four times toward the close of Advent, and I remember saying it to you several times on Christmas Eve. And if you don't mind, I'm going to stick with it again today. You'll hear it more than once, undoubtedly, in the preaching of this sermon -- "Christians are the Christmas people."

Now you may have to bear with me a bit as I explain. You see, if we were asked to name all the different groups of people who believe in God, we'd number Christians among them -- one among others, let's be very honest with ourselves. We Christians are not the only ones who believe in God. Jews believe in God....Hindus believe in God....Muslims believe in God....so I could go on. But of all the people who believe in God, we Christians stand in a class all by ourselves, because we are the Christmas People -- we're the only ones to whom we can say God has uniquely revealed Himself. Of all the people on the face of the earth, we Christians are the ones who say, "Once upon a time

there was a Bethlehem...once upon a time, historically established, there were people who followed the Star until it came to a particular place, and there they saw certain people - - and one in particular. And as they beheld the face of a Baby they knelt down and worshipped, and whispered the name of GOD.

Christians are the Christmas People. You know very well, of course you do, that man is by nature curious. And his curiosity leads him in this direction: what's God like? Oh, a long time ago I settled this in my own mind. I don't think the question-of-questions is, is there a God? I think life has its own way of bringing people to terms with that. So the question-of-questions isn't, Is there a God? The question-of-questions remains: What's He like? Man is by nature curious - - what is He like?

And because he happens to be the kind of person that he is, he won't quite be satisfied unless he can see, and sometimes unless he can touch, and handle. Well a long, long time ago, God bless them, the Jews said, "No you don't! When you come to this business of dealing with God, He's not to be touched, He's not to be handled!" Round about them on every side those Hebrews, as they wandered around, discovered that there were people who were religious and who had their god or gods. They fashioned them -- they took a piece of stone, or metal, or silver, or gold, and they said "Look! -- here's our god!"and they knelt down and they would worship, because they could see, they could touch, they could handle.

But God be thanked, in the development of the human race, there was a particular group of people, the Hebrews, who said, "You don't do this with God! A God who can be seen, a god who can be touched, a god who can be handled -- he really isn't much of a god, because if you can handle a god, then you can manipulate god, you can maneuver him. And the God who is the Father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not that kind of a God." So for a while of all

the people on the face of the earth, the Hebrews said, the God we want to talk to you about is the invisible God.

Now here you have this craving on the part of man to be able to know what God is like, and the Hebrews kept talking about a God that you can't see. Now how can you know anything about something that you can't see?

Now all of this leads me to introduce the text for today's sermon. It's a magnificent text, honestly it is, and it's the last verse that Mr. Sieger read for us, in that tremendous first chapter of the Gospel according to John, it's the 18th verse and it reads exactly in the way I'm going to give it to you:

"No man has seen God at any time; the only
begotten Son which is in the bosom of the
Father, he has declared him . . . "

(or as some translations have put it: "He has interpreted him"

or as some have put it: "He has revealed him . . . "

" he's made him known . . . ")

Well now you have it. John, writing the New Testament, says, "Let's face it."and he was speaking according to his tradition and his upbringing, paying tremendous respect to those who introduced him to the Faith - - "No man has seen God at any time.".....which is simply to say that no man by searching can find out God! This is rank presumption on our part, to think that we could be smart enough and clever enough to figure out what God is like exactly on our own! That's why this spiritually sensitive John is saying, "Let's be honest -- no man has seen God."

I wish it would be re-printed - - I would hope that they might consider re-printing them -- there were two volumes, a very clever book gotten out by our British friends. It's called, "Asking Them Questions." Let me tell you what they did some years back.

They took these questions that youngsters are inclined to ask that have a religious emphases -- the questions that youngsters ask that you and I find difficult to answer. And then they asked the most learned men in England to deal with those questions. It's an excellent compendium. And I remember very well the very first question that's dealt with is this one:

"Who made God"?

....and the answer is superbly given: "There are some questions that

really don't have much meaning . . . "

Would you believe it, that's the way the author began! And this is one of those questions. For if you talk in terms of a made god, then the god-maker is more important than God! Why settle for God if you can go beyond God to someone who made Him? A god that you can make is a god that you can handle...
...manipulate...maneuver. And so the Hebrews were wise, and they said, we want to talk with you about an invisible God.

Among my full-color transparencies that I cherish is one of the Arch of Titus that I took on my first visit abroad. You'll find it there in the Roman Forum, if I remember correctly. It commemorates the fact that in 70 A.D. the Holy Land was invaded. When the invading troops came, mind you, among the infidels there were those who took their troops into the area which was very sacred to the Jews. They even marched their troops into the temple area... and then deliberately tore aside the curtains that led into the Holy-of-Holies, because they were taught that this was where their God was -- this is where the Hebrews came to worship Him -- God above all gods and King above all kings... and when they tore aside the curtains, there was nothing there! And they laughed, and they laughed, and they laughed.....these people were worshipping an invisible god!

But the fact remains, we want to know what this invisible God is like. And God in His wisdom has so made us that we can't find out on our own -- we

know Him only as He Himself has seen fit to reveal Himself. And that's what Christmas is all about! That's why, you see, for four weeks we named it Advent -- Someone's coming to us, Someone's taking the initiative to come to where we are, to stoop to our level. God is big enough that He can do that. It takes a big man to lower himself. God is so big that He can humble Himself, take upon Himself the form of a servant, come clothed in human form! -- in order to reveal Himself.

Now I've also lived long enough to know now I hope you're going to recognize the validity of this -- at first blush you may shy away from it: a person is as a person does. I may look upon you as you sit silently, and wonder what you're like. And I won't know. But let me see you in action, and then I can have some idea as to what you really are.

Now you may say to me very quickly, but a person can be hypocritical. But even when he's hypocritical his actions will find him out and prove his basic worth. God is as God does. And so, and I say it very carefully, once upon a time, historically established, God came to us and here on this earth performed for us - - and I use the word advisedly - - all those deeds of love and mercy, right here on this earth. There was once upon a time Somebody who lived and did exactly the things that God does! And once we've seen Jesus Christ, we know now what God is like.

Of all the people on the face of the earth, Christians are the Christmas people. We're the ones who have Christmas. For God has come to us, put Himself down in front of us, and said: See.

You may say to me, well after it's all said and done, Pastor, what difference does it make? Isn't it enough to know that there is a God? What difference does it make to know what He's really like?

It makes all the difference in the world.

- - some people who believe in a God believe that He's

undependable, believe that He delights in cajoling, believe that He delights in playing a game of hide-and-seek. Christians are the Christmas people. Now that God has come to us in Jesus Christ, we can say:

"See - how much He cares for us - -

See - how much He loves us!

...and the mark of love is always identification. A mark of love is always His willingness to stoop, to meet our need where we are. I wouldn't want to go on living if I couldn't be numbered among the Christmas people who now know what God is like.

He did it so well, you know, that one time, even in His day, it was the people who came to Him and said what I have been trying to say to you -- the question-of-questions: "What's God really like? - - Show us the Father and we'll be satisfied."

....and then Jesus magnificently answered,
in words that no one else has ever dared to use:

"Look at me. He who sees me sees the Father."

Rejoice, my friends - - Christians are the Christmas people!

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

January 12, 1975

"WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT"
(Acts 10:35)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

The title of the sermon on this Anniversary Sunday is "What It's All About" and the text is from the Epistle for the Day, the 11th verse of the 10th chapter of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles:

"You know the word which he sent
preaching the good news of Jesus
Christ

When our Assistant Pastor was asked to provide some measure of group involvement at these delightful parish-wide fellowship suppers that we had last fall, he startled some of us, you may recall, by asking us to pay attention to the obvious. Remember how he said, "Tell me, how many holes are there in that ceiling grill above you?" . . . and then with an equally dupish glint in his eye he said, "Now how about the Nave -- how many windows are there?"

(for goodness' sake, don't start counting them now -- it's hard enough for me to hold your attention as it is!)

.... "How many doors are there that lead into the Nave? -- How many seats are there, that is, how many rows of seats?"

.... Well, they are obvious. You enter by them, you use them, you pass through these doors. You remember, of course, that not very many current systems were given.

But when I walked away I thought to myself, I wonder, if we had a different kind of session, when we allowed ourselves to become somewhat serious and then we would have asked the question: What purpose do these seats serve? Why stained glass windows? -- why not just clear glass windows? -- What really is the meaning that's to be attached to the fact that people pass through doors

that lead to a particular place such as Saint Luke Church?

As an example, those of you who have visited cathedrals across the waters, you know that in some places they don't have benches at all, they have chairs, and in some places they don't have any seats at all -- the people simply stand, or they may kneel on the hard pavement below....

Well now, on this Anniversary Sunday, I've come to ask you to pay attention to the obvious -- this Saint Luke Church. It's impressive here at the corner of Colesville Road and Highland Drive. Modified English Gothic architecture, the red doors -- it gets attention. Every now and then in a new member class we ask people: How did you happen to come to Saint Luke Church? And would you believe it, on more than one occasion, maybe three, there were those who said they were struck by the red doors -- they caught their eye. Others have said it looked as though it was a church that people cared for, and we felt as though we wanted to visit. Well, it's obvious that Saint Luke Church has a building here....it's obvious that as a Family in God we are here -- we've become now the largest of all the parishes in the Maryland Synod. You can't ignore something of such numerical strength and which contributes so significantly to the life of the Church here and far away -- well it's obvious that there is a Saint Luke Church. But suppose I were to ask you this question: So what? What does it mean to be part of Saint Luke Church?

Going back to what Pastor David did for us at the Fellowship Suppers.... about these doors. Whatever door you happened to use when you entered -- where did it lead you? In what direction will it take you?

Let me suggest an answer or two.

Whether you've realized it or not, when you passed through those doors that lead you inside Saint Luke Church they can lead you into the direction of the altar -- a very special place. Loretta Bell, bless her soul, she's absolutely right and proper when she would deal with the members of the Altar.

Guild, that even when they were here during the week they would walk and work in hushed tone, they would even don a special garment when they would prepare the altar. We're right and proper we say to those who are here for a choir rehearsal, that when they stand within the shadow of the altar, levity and the facetious do not become this place.....even at a rehearsal you come and you leave quietly.....

....we're right when we teach our boys and girls in our Confirmation Class that when you enter, this is no ordinary place. These doors can lead you to a special spot -- an altar -- an altar that symbolizes the presence and the power and the pardon of Jesus Christ... Now when you pass through these doors, does it ever occur to you that these doors lead you in that direction?

Again and ever so often somebody says, "Where will this road take me?" Ask yourself the question, where does this obvious doorway of Saint Luke Church take you? Answer significantly. It takes you in the direction of an altar that symbolizes the fact that someone sacrificed His life and died for us. Every time we gather together we have a right to say to ourselves, we are people who have been died for. We're people for whom someone has done something that we ourselves could not do.

The door that you use -- it's obvious. But where will it take you?

...for some of you, it takes you in the direction of the baptismal font, where the most precious thing that God has ever allowed you -- a bit of your two selves and God -- and you've heard that child named for Jesus Christ....

....through that door you've come to this place, to this particular spot, where promises are made, and are kept.....

...when you pass through these doors that lead you into Saint Luke Church, you come into the direction and you face this particular spot -- the pulpit that now commands a measure of

respect by its very size and dimension - - because what happens here is tremendously important -- the proclamation of God's truth and the sharing of His love as Jesus Christ is interpreted for us....

It's obvious that you are here. It is obvious that you keep coming back again and again. But suppose somebody stood on the outside of the Red Doors and was bold enough to say to you: "What brings you to this place repeatedly? -- what do you expect to get? what do you get inside there?"

...because usually we go to certain places in order to get something....

-- "What do you get in there?"

We have a neighbor who lives across the street, not a neighbor of the Christian faith. And one day she stopped me, some distance from here, and she said, "You're the preacher down there, aren't you? What about your people? - - I part my curtains and I look at them, I see them leaving on a Sunday morning. They hardly speak to each other!"

...her question really was, "What goes on inside?"

I could have told her, I suppose, and I think that I did, that they're making way for the people who come to the next service...or many of them come from some distance and they really don't know each other. I think I should have said, "Well if they look serious-minded to you and they don't talk to each other, it's because they're thinking about the sermon!" But suppose somebody stood outside this door and said to you, "Why do you come here?"....."What do you get?"

Fourteen years ago this month you allowed me to make that special mission overseas, around the world, and a significant amount of the time was spent in India. In the full-color transparencies that I review occasionally I have one of a holy man seated on a bench in a railway station in Madras, a holy man in contemplation. He's giving his life to thinking the thoughts of God. And as I look at that transparency I say to myself, suppose he would have broken his silence and he would have seen my clerical collar and he would have said, "You're

a weaver of the cloth -- you're a Christian, aren't you?"

And I would have said, Yes.

Suppose he would have said to me, "What is this Christian Gospel that you talk about?" -- in much the same spirit, suppose a Hindu stood outside these doors this morning, suppose a Shintoist, suppose a Muslim, suppose a Jew, and he'd say to you: "What do you get in there?"

I knew how some of you would answer, you'd say, "We believe in God! And we come to talk about God."

And he'd say, "Wonderful! I believe in God."

....as a Shintoist he could say that!

....as a Buddhist he could say that!

....as a Hindu he could say that!

....as a Muslim he could say that!

....as a Jew he could say that!

And then suppose he'd press you and say, "What do you get in there that I don't get at the synagogue?...what do you get in there that I don't get at the temple?....what do you get in there that I don't get at the mosque?" Could you answer? What is it that these doors lead us into?

I'm happy to tell you that it's the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. And this is what Saint Luke Church has been all about in these thirty-six years, to talk to people about the love of God as it's been made manifest in and through Jesus Christ. If you were to ask me, well explain it to me in language that perhaps the non-Christian might understand, I'd do my best to attempt it, and I would hope that he might understand why I'd say it this way -- it's the Gospel that liberates us -- it's the Good News that makes us free!

I read news reports, and I become weary, and I become despondent. I've read certain journals, I've given up reading some of them, because they have

a way of imprisoning me within the situation of the world of which I am part -- they freeze me into a mold. And I don't want to be frozen into a mold. That's the kind of a world in which we happen to live. But when you come here, we're liberated, we're told that God exists, and that He exists specifically in Jesus Christ. We're told that we're sinners, but we're told something more -- we're told that we're being saved. We're told that we have the hope of Heaven. We're told that God is still in control of His world, that He hasn't forsaken us! We're told that God needs us, that God can use us.

When Pastor David and I have those rare moments, as I've told you before, when we can sit down and talk about the things that mean so much to us in our relationship with you and what you bring into our lives....every now and then we talk about some of the wellnigh intolerable situations in which some of you find yourselves. I know very well that for some of you the only hour of peace that you have in the week is what you find within this place on the Lord's Day. I know very well that for some of you the only bit of heaven that you experience here on earth is the kind of thing that you share within these holy walls on a Lord's Day.

...that's why we ask that the Prelude be the kind of quieting influence to hush your souls and to make you ready for all that follows....

...that's why whenever anyone comes to this sacred desk he doesn't come casually, but laid hold upon by the Holy Spirit, that whatever words might be spoken might be words of comfort and courage and inspired by the Holy Spirit....

.....because that situation outside these doors may remain pretty much the same after you have been here. But when you go back, you go back empowered -- not as the defeated, but as one who's meant to live triumphantly.

David H. C. Read, pastor-preacher of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in

New York City, tells about his experience as a prisoner of war in West Germany. And when Patton's forces came to liberate, there were tens of thousands of people whose lives were at stake. But Dr. Reed imagines how people might have reacted when they were told: "The Americans are here, we're being made free! We're being liberated!"....and the prisoner inside would look around and see the barbed wire, he'd still see the cell in which he had been confined -- he could refuse to believe it. He might not accept it. But there it was.

So with all the strength that I can command on this Anniversary Sunday, for which our hearts are filled with joy for what God gives us as a family in God in Saint Luke Church, don't miss what these doors lead you into. Don't fail to take the better blessing.

Sometimes when Winifred gets me to go shopping with her, we come back from the store with an item or two of lesser value than what we might have had if only we would have taken time to shop more thoroughly and to evaluate.

....maybe on this Anniversary Sunday you might have a moment for evaluating, to realize the precious thing that's being offered, inside these doors, Sunday after Sunday.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"ANANIAS, THE MAGNANIMOUS"
(Acts 9:10-19)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

On this day in the calendar of the Church that remembers for us the conversion of St. Paul, the sermon significantly enough bears the title "A Man Named Ananias, The Magnanimous." -- and the text is from the first Lesson that was read, the 9th chapter of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, the 17th verse:

"And Ananias entered the house, and
laying his hands on Saul, said,
Brother"

Make me six things about Ananias....all right, four.....three.....two. For some of you, you've not given much thought to him at all, and maybe today in the preaching of this sermon you will be learning something about him that you never knew, or perhaps that you've allowed yourself to forget.

He really was quite a fellow and he deserves far more than what we've given him. There are a number of reasons why I can say this to you. One, that you and I need to remember that God seldom deals with one person alone.

...I'd better say that again: God seldom deals with one
person by himself....

Like as not there are other people involved, that is. When He's dealing with you, when He's dealing with me, there are always other people that He sees fit to use as He deals with us.

That most certainly is true as we think of this man Paul, who today is in the calendar of the Church remembered, particularly his conversion experience. You know all about that, don't you? He'd received order that gave him authoriza-

tion to kill Christians. He was a murderer, he was an enemy of the church of Jesus Christ. But on his way, there on the Damascus Road, was the blinding light that felled him to the ground. We think of this when we think of the conversion of Saul, and we focus our attention upon this episode.

But I tell you, you can't do it at the expense of two other people who are also involved in the conversion experience. You must think first of all of a man named Stephen -- a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ who died a martyr's death. He was stoned to death....

.....do you know how they put him to death?

...they threw him down into a pit, and then the infuriated ones grabbed whatever stones they could handle and then they went with all the vehemence that possessed their soul and threw them down on the man who couldn't escape...until his form was left broken and battered and bloodied....

But according to the Scriptures, somewhere in the goings-on, they took his clothing and threw it down at the feet of a man named Saul. Saul was able to see first-hand how a Christian faced death, and now this saint lifted up his eyes unto Heaven and said something about not laying it to their charge. When you talk about the conversion of Paul, don't ever forget that God seldom deals with a man alone. Like as not He'll involve other people, and in that conversion of Paul, early on the scene, unwittingly of course to this man Saul, was a man named Stephen.

Well, there was the experience, the episode on the Damascus Road, and after it was over God has another man that He brings into the picture, a man by the name of Anselm.

Now let us pause for a moment to suggest that you never forget that God always has His man. He's preparing him for the time when he enters on the stage, when it's his particular part that has to be done. Life is like a drama,

of course it is, and every now and then waiting in the wings God has the man whose turn will come, and in this case it's Ananias who's been getting ready. The Scripture lesson tells us that he was a disciple, and a disciple is a follower of Jesus Christ....and a disciple, from the root meaning of the word, is a learner. And what is learning except trying to get ready for something? God was getting him ready. So He gives Ananias the assignment.

Remember now, God seldom deals with a man alone. Like as not He involves other people. Now He's involving Ananias, and He gives Ananias his particular assignment.

Now I'm sorry I have to tell you this. While with all the strength that I can command I am happy to tell you that it's absolutely wonderful to be a follower of Jesus Christ -- there isn't anything in the world like it, and that's why, as God gives me breath, as long as I live I'll want to bear testimony to that: it's wonderful! -- to make yourself available to what God wants to have done through your life!

...but it's not always easy. I have to say that quickly. sometimes it's difficult. But just because it's not easy and just because it's difficult is no reason for us to shy away when God makes the assignment....

Well, Ananias, just as human as you and I, when the assignment was being made began to back off. Because he's quick to tell God when He's giving the assignment that he knows what kind of a fellow this man Saul is, and in the jargon that you and I sometimes use he might have said to the voice from Heaven, "Back off, now -- come now! Do you really know what you're telling me to do? Come on, God, you know everything -- You know what kind of a man he is -- and You expect us to go and baptize him! He doesn't deserve this kind of treatment!"of course, from a human standpoint, it wouldn't be expected that he'd get that kind of treatment. So, human as we are, we shy away from the assignment

when God gives it to us, especially when God says, "You're my man!"

Well let me give you a bit of advice, which I hope that I myself may remember: give God a chance to present His case! Don't just walk away and take your medicine and go to the other end of the room because the assignment isn't as easy as you'd like it to be. Let God present His full story, because some of us know very well that when God gives us an assignment, He's always quick to reassure us that He has His reasons, and it can be done.

Well, fortunately Ananias stayed long enough for God to tell the whole story. He was told -- if you don't mind my saying it to you in this manner -- picture God speaking: "I know what I'm up to! I can see some things that you can't see. I can read the future -- I know the stuff out of which this man is made! I have confidence. He's a chosen vessel. If you can't believe it, then believe it because I tell it to you. Take My word for it . . ."

...well that's the way it might have been. At any rate, he was given the assurance that he was a chosen vessel, and so Ananias goes. Ananias -- mark it well -- the magnanimous.

Now let's pause here for a moment, and I want to ask you a question that perhaps you haven't thought about for a long while, if ever: Where does a man, once bad, turn when he decides to become good? That's never been much of a question for you, has it? For, speaking now of the Christian community, why, you've always been part of it. You've always been numbered among the accepted. For the most part we take boys into the Christian family. We've grown up with it. We've always been part of it. But my question remains: Where does a man, once bad, turn when he decides to become good?

Well you know the answer. He can't go back to the old cronies. They now no longer will claim him -- he's a turn-coat. They can't stomach him. There's only one group to whom he can turn -- the so-called good people. But what if they would reject him? What if they won't have done with his past? There are

people like that, who never have done with another man's past.

I told you about that woman, didn't I, who lived in that small town, who had a bad reputation. And if you come from a small town you know what people who live in a small town do with people who have bad reputations -- they can be cruel, and they cut them off from any kind of hope or possibility of changing. You live too close to them. But there's always such a thing as the miracle of grace, and this woman, by the grace of God, decided to have done with her past. But other people wouldn't have done with it. Nonetheless she came to church one Lord's Day, and you can imagine what happened in that small town when she came to church! -- the restrained rejection, but it was there. It's just as though the center aisle of that church had frozen to ice and one could skate right down it. She was sensitive, and she was heard to say, "Isn't there any place in this town to which a person can turn when he wants to become better than he was?"

By the grace of God Anselm goes to Saul to let him know that he's welcome. By the grace of God Anselm goes to Saul to prove and to show that the church is a forgiving family...

...you know the old story that they tell, about that cantankerous man who all his life was obstinate and delighted in keeping his enemies, and the list got longer and longer. But then he became stricken and ill. He had some idea that maybe the end was imminent. So he called some of his enemies to come into his room, and he said to them, as the story goes: "You know the kind of relationship that we've had -- you know the enmity that's prevailed among us. Well, hard as it may be for you to believe, I want you to know that I don't hold anything against you, I forgive you." They were confused...and as they turned to walk away the old coddger braced himself in the bed and with a strong deliberate voice said, "But come back

a minute! -- if I get well, this whole thing's off!"

There are some people who can be forgiving for the moment. And perhaps when they don't have to stick with it. Ananias got himself involved. He had to stick with it. He invited this man into the Christian family.

Do you realize that that's exactly what the Christian church is meant to be -- the society of the forgiving? You know that, don't you? I want to pose as a prophet this morning and make a prediction. Realizing that now on the outside of the church there are more and more people outside than ever before -- I think you can say that -- but I also want to make a prediction: the day is going to come and some of them are going to come back. Will we be ready to receive them? -- rebellious ones, the insensitive ones, the ones who irritate us...but the day is going to come when they'll want to come back. And then you and I will be put to the acid test. Will we be magnanimous enough to be able to say, "Brother -- welcome!"

I want you to hear this precisely, and that's why I'm going to read it for you: Some of us forget that the church is not a collection of people who think they are good, but a people who have discovered that they are not good, and they consistently need the grace of God."

...We're all sinners, but there are two kinds of sinners:
Those who don't much care -- and Those, like us, who do care,
and want to have the situation improved. But we're all sinners.
And that's why, by the grace of God, we can always afford to
make room for anyone who's headed in our direction.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"WHEN CHANCE DICTATES CHOICE"
(Luke 10:30)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

If it's a title you'll be wanting for today's sermon, let me suggest:

"When Chance Dictates Choice" -- and the text, the 30th verse of the 10th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke:

"A certain man went down from Jerusalem to
Jericho, and fell among thieves....."

Now before anything else is said, let me tell you that it happened one morning not so long ago, and it took place less than five hundred feet from where I'm now standing -- for those of you who are in the Nave, you would have been much closer to the incident.

Daylight had come, and, as I got the story, Pastor David was disturbed, aroused, alerted, by the voice of a screaming woman, and when he was able to look into her face he saw nothing but terror written there.

Now this is what had happened. Early in the morning, after daylight had come, not so long ago, she had crossed the parking lot right at the rear of this structure, from the Dale Drive side, heading toward Highland Drive. And as she was nearing Highland Drive a motorist came down Highland Drive and saw her. He stopped his car quickly -- dashed out of his car, went to her, grabbed her purse, went back to the car and speedily drove away, leaving her with nothing but a traumatic experience and a haunting memory.

I've come to this sacred desk to tell you that I had deep thoughts when I crossed that parking lot the next morning, and you're entitled to know what went through my mind. I was asking myself a question -- not, what would I have done had I been Pastor David? -- and been confronted by a woman who had been vic-

timized -- I know full well what I would have done. For as a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, coming upon the woman by chance, my choice would have been dictated by my Christian conscience, particularly as I remember something that our Lord said about such an experience. You may remember the parable of the Good Samaritan.....

....some of us have traveled that treacherous road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and now, as Jesus said, this chap was going along and finally got mugged. There were those who laid upon him, and left him battered and bloodied and bruised.....and then Jesus said how there were two people, presumably going to a religious meeting, I'm sorry to tell you, who passed by because they had no time or inclination to give him any heed.....

But according to the parable -- you remember it, of course you do! -- there was this good Samaritan who went to him, bound up his wounds, put him on his beast of burden, took him to the inn, paid for his stay and guaranteed continual keep until he had recovered. Now Jesus told that story in order that it might be made plain to us what our choice would be when by chance we had come upon a person who had been victimized.

But as you read the parable of the Good Samaritan, you get no instruction whatsoever, there's no guideline as to what the course of conduct for a Christian would be if he would have come upon the incident when it was taking place. And that's exactly the question that came to my mind as I crossed the parking lot that day -- what would I have done, had I come upon the scene when the fellow was snatching the purse?

Billy Graham, America's great preacher, and as is true for great preachers, they all have their trademark. And I suppose the thing I associate with Billy Graham, and I thank God for it, he keeps saying: "The Bible says -- " Now you know the high regard that I have for the Scriptures. Of course you do. But sometimes I say to myself, Dr. Graham, you're giving a false implication. You

are permitting us to think that the Bible has something to say to us about anything -- anytime, anywhere.....that the Bible speaks to every situation.

Ah, the Bible may speak to all of our predicaments, but not to every situation. There's a difference.

And so I remember, not that I was being facetious, but my mind goes back to those days in a theological classroom, when as a student we had a professor who was talking to us about this same parable -- trying to put in front of us the Christian strategy when somebody has been victimized. And even then, and this incident brought it back to my mind, I made bold to say to the professor and to ask him a question to which he had no answer: What would Christ have had us do, had we come upon the scene when the robbers were perpetrating their evil deed?

.....well, there's the question. How would you answer? Now remember, I'm wrestling now with the Christian thing to do.

It may be far more relevant than they realize. Didn't I read somewhere the statistic that in 1971, that in the city of New York alone there were over 7,000 muggings. Now you let that mind of yours be a calculator and you will discover that that comes out to about 203 a day, just in one city alone. And if I wanted to have a kind of an exercise, you might be surprised if I went down the church aisle and said, "Put up your hands if you've ever had this experience of either being mugged, having your purse snatched, or come upon the scene when it's happening to somebody else." What is the Christian strategy? If by chance we come upon such an incident, what are some of the choices that come to us as Christians? Is there always a Christian way to handle a problem?

Well before I say anything else, let me encourage you to spontaneously offer a prayer that you might be enlightened -- a target kind of prayer, a dart that goes right to the heart of the matter, because if ever a man ought to pray, it might be in a time like that, as far as living in this world is concerned.

Well, there's been a series of suggestions what a Christian could do.....

...he might call the police -- keep himself at a safe distance, that is, go for help. But while he's engaged in doing that, the poor fellow, you see, can be left half-dead, if not killed outright. Well, is that a choice? Of course it is....

....somebody has also suggested that this is a choice: you might divert the attention of the murderer, the robber -- divert the attention from his would-be victim to yourself! Maybe the Christian thing to do would be to offer yourself as a sacrifice. Now you think about that! I can't give you any guideline in Scripture specifically -- there is no blueprint here.....

...or what would you do, somebody suggests, that you might get involved -- get a piece of the action -- get with it! Well if that should happen, the result could be, honestly now -- two of you being bloodied and bruised and battered and left half-dead.

What now ought one to do? I once knew a person who said, well, as a Christian, try to reason with the person -- quote Scripture. I'm not making light of that. It could work. I can't give you guarantees.

...Miriam Hunter, one-time member of this congregation to whom Pastor David looks for excellent leadership when we have our annual week at camp, told us last summer about an incident that occurred at the home of her parents, aged folks, in their late 80's, early 90's. They lived in a farm house in a rural area in Pennsylvania. There one night they had an intruder. The unwanted one came up the stairs, disturbed their sleep, and he attacks Miriam's father. And while that was going on, Miriam's mother, a pious soul, said to the fellow, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself -- remember your Sunday School lessons -- you know you shouldn't be doing this! God will hold you

responsible!"....she talked to him in this vein. Irritated and annoyed, he turned on her and gave her the same kind of treatment he had given the old man.....

What ought one do? How involved should one allow himself to become? I keep asking myself this question.

Well, having said all of this, there's still something else that needs to be said. As a Christian one ought to be concerned with the problem -- really one should. And somebody has suggested that there are three things that we need to keep in mind.

One is that as Christians we ought to do everything in our power to keep such things from happening. Now some of us are quite lethargic in this manner. We read about it, we listen, but we never get involved in any preventive measures. We never become the conscience for the community. Let me discourage you from subscribing to the "Baden principle." You don't know what I mean by that, of course you don't. Well, when I became the Pastor of this congregation we had living across the street from us Harry Baden, and then Harry spent the last years of his life in the National Lutheran Home.

....and when I'd go to visit him, in his old age he would say to me as we talked about the sad state of the world, "Well, Pastor, I go to bed at night without listening to the news, because when I'd turn on television or I'd listen to the news, all I'd get was the same old story about misery and crime. There wasn't a thing I could do about it so I won't listen to it any more."

....I call that the "Baden principle." I don't subscribe to it, because as Christians we need to find ways and means by which we can restore sanity to our community. We need to explore ways and means by which we can guarantee a measure of safety for people of all ages on the streets, in the parking lots, at any hour

of the night or day. That may be idealistic, but at least we have to get with it and try to prevent such things from happening.

The second guideline that's been suggested is this: That if one by chance should come upon the incident, then as a Christian you do what you can to minimize it. Don't let it accelerate. The bank officials are absolutely right when they say to their clerks and tellers, "Give them the money -- play it cool! Maybe we can replace the money, but we can't replace the human life." Keep the thing from spreading.

The third guideline that's been suggested in the case of such incidents, if one should come upon the thing after it's happened -- you see, we've talked about what one ought to do before, what one might be able to do during..... Jesus Christ comes down mighty heavily upon what one ought to do as a Christian after the person has been victimized. Well, for heaven's sakes, you don't preach to the fallow, and you don't shake your finger in his face and say, "You should never have traveled that Jericho Road by yourself!" He did. It's too late to call him now. As a Christian you meet the need. Somebody has been battered and bloodied. You get into action. You provide an ameliorating influence. You alleviate the misery.

Well, this is a different kind of a sermon as I've preached to you today. But I'm realistic enough to know that it's as real as this afternoon....tonight... ..or tomorrow morning. We happen to live in a wicked world. Such things do occur, in increasing numbers. Let's see what we can do to prevent them. And when they occur, if we should be there, by the grace of God to minimize the action.....and once it's over, not to fail to provide the compassion and the help that's needed. And that's about all I can say to you.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"AGAINST PREVAILING CURRENTS"
(Matthew 5:38-49)

THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, Thy Son,
our Lord. Amen.

I don't suggest that you take too seriously what I'm about to say, in case you could become unduly sensitive the next time you receive visitors in your home. But it could be that when they next visit you, you might wish to follow their eyes, that is, to discover for yourself where they look and what seems to be important to them. Sometimes when I visit with folks I discover that the people who are with me immediately take a mental note from floor to ceiling of the decor of the room and the furnishings that happen to be there. This is a thing that claims some people's interest.

I don't mind telling you that I've discovered that I find myself making a mental note when I visit in certain people's homes -- sure I'm impressed with your furnishings and your decor. But one of the things that impresses me most is your periodicals. I look round about to see the magazines and the newspapers and the journals, because these can tell a great deal about a person -- his reading habits. Basically they tell me they can even tell about a person's character, because a man does become, to all intents and purposes, pretty much according to the things that he reads.

Well there's one magazine that I haven't discovered in your homes as I've gone visiting. I have never discovered a copy of MONDAY MORNING. There is such a journal. Now if your curiosity is aroused, let me tell you that it's a publication especially designed for Presbyterian preachers, and to be read on a Monday morning, the day after the high peak of the Sunday experience. In some corners of the ministry they still speak about Monday as being a 'low Monday' --

Sunday has run its course, then there's a let-down when Monday comes. And somewhere along the line some clever chap developed this concept of "Let's get a special journal to be read by preachers on a Monday morning."

I'm telling you about this because several years ago a very creative Presbyterian preacher out in Pocatello, Idaho, wrote an article for MONDAY MORNING. And would I surprise you if I were to tell you that in that article he suggests that they ought to develop a kind of rating scheme for sermons, just as we have for the movies, so that if you were to come to church on a certain Sunday morning you might know in advance the kind of sermon that you're going to hear.

Well, I have in front of me the notations that I made from his article. If you don't mind, let me show you how his mind went . . .

"I propose that we ought to mark some sermons (G)

--- that is, Generally Acceptable to Everyone, full of inoffensive platitudes, such as 'Go ye into all the world and smile' . . . and 'what the world needs most is peace and motherhood'. Such a sermon is usually described as: Wonderful; Marvelous.

Others, I suggest, ought to be labeled (M)

--- for Mature Congregations Only -- at times this sermon would make the Gospel relevant to today's issues, in subtle ways, of course. It may even contain mild suggestions for change. This sermon is often described as: Challenging; Thought-provoking. . .even though no one intends to take action or to change his own attitude.

Other sermons, I suggest, could be labeled (R)

--- definitely Restricted To Those Not Upset By The Truth

This sermon tells it like it is. It could be very threatening to the comfortable. It is most often described as: Disturbing; or Controversial....and usually indicates that the preacher has an outside source of income.

Finally, there are sermons that ought to be rated (X) - positively Limited To Those Who Can Handle Explosive Ideas. This sermon really 'socks it to them.' It's the kind of sermon that landed Jeremiah in the well...got Amos run out of town....and set things up for the stoning of Stephen. It is always described as Shocking; or In Poor Taste. The minister who preaches this sermon had better have his suitcase packed and his insurance paid up."

Having shared this with you, I have asked myself, as you might well know that I would, in the extracts that appear occasionally on the front page of The MESSENGER, if I were to indicate in advance for you just what this sermon's going to say, how many of you might stay away? -- how many of you might find it offensive if on a particular Sunday the sermon came at you pretty hard and heavy?

I dare say to you, and I hope you'll understand the manner and the mood by which I tell you, one of the finest compliments I think I ever received as your preacher came a number of years ago by a woman who has since gone to glory, when she said, "Your sermons make it very difficult for me. You make me so dissatisfied with the kind of person that I am. You seem to show me in your sermons what Christ expects from us, and I just can't quite measure up."

....I am equally troubled, however, that she should have said what

she did without adding -- "but I'm re-assured in your sermons that the Holy Spirit can empower us and enable us to become better than we are."

I've come to this sacred desk this morning to preach a sermon that I hope will unsettle you, that I most certainly hope will make you dissatisfied with the kind of person that you are, and give you to understand in a very real way that this business of being a Christian is a very serious and demanding thing. If it's a title that you want for the sermon it's this: "AGAINST PREVAILING CURRENTS"....and the text is from the Sermon on the Mount, the 5th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew.....

said Jesus: "You have heard that it was said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you, if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other cheek.'"

As I am constantly trying to re-discover the mind and the spirit of Jesus Christ, I am finding anew how demanding He was, how again and ever so often, no matter where He went He was asking us to stretch, to strive, for something far better than the world could offer. He did His job so well that people got sick and tired of His trying to tell them that they ought not to level off too easily in their behavior patterns, that they ought not to take the standard of the world as their standard. Because He kept pounding away at this tremendous truth, they finally let Him have it, and they got rid of Him. They didn't want a preacher around who was always demanding and demanding and demanding that they become better than they were, and that they not accommodate themselves to peer pressure, to the standards of the world.

I can't stand people who are fundamentalistic, but I do have a high and holy regard for people who deal with fundamentals. And I suggest to you that we begin

to appreciate more than we've ever before those Christians who allow themselves to deal with the fundamentals of the Christian faith, who never allow themselves to get too far away from what Jesus Christ requires from us -- who gather their children together and are always trying to put in front of them the standards that Jesus Christ expects from us, who are always trying to inculcate basic Christian principles. I have a high regard for them.

Some of us don't do it enough. We compromise too easily, we settle almost immediately, for the standards of the world. It never occurs to us that as Christians we ought to be different. Oh, the pressure is very great and it's very subtle. My allegiance to Jesus Christ shook me up yesterday, I think it was yesterday, when I read a full-page advertisement in the New York Times. I've forgotten the name of the movie that they were promoting, but the full-page advertisement had a series of paragraphs, each one ending in this way: "if it feels good, it can't be wrong -- go ahead and do it!" This is the theme that was repeated paragraph after paragraph. And again and over so often in this world of which we are part the world is always saying to us: "Go ahead and do it! Don't let anybody tell you that it's wrong -- everybody's doing it!"

The world has never been the same since a carpenter's son went around from place to place and said to people: "What do you do that's more than others? How different are you really from other people?" Whether you like it or not, Christians are meant to be different -- different in their attitude toward themselves, than the man of the world -- different in their attitudes toward one another than the people of the world.....different in their attitude toward God.

But I know what happens, of course I do. Somebody trips us up, and like as not we spend ways and means trying to find the way to get even with them. Somebody deals us an unfair blow, and we find it extremely difficult to think of them in an impartial way. Our mind is always clouded and we think evil thoughts of them, if we don't try to find ways by which to get even. And when we react that

way, of course, we react according to the pressures and the standards of the world. Jesus Christ said, "What do you do more than others?" Wherein are we different?

Said Nietzsche, the German philosopher, to a group of Christians -- he himself not being a Christian -- "You Christians will have to look and act more like your Redeemer if you expect me to believe it." The inference is of course that he couldn't quite see any difference in those who take the name of Christ.

I'm always distressed by people who, even within the church itself, are so prone to adopt the standards of the world. I have told you repeatedly, and if I've told you repeatedly it's just because it bears repeating....out in India when the Christian missionary came, there would always be those who would be glad to hear him, and particularly those who had already made their commitment to the faith. Where they didn't have a church or a chapel to which to go they'd just squat right down in the street, at the side of the street, of course, and they'd form a little circle, and the preacher would talk to them about their Christian commitment....about the glory of being numbered in the ranks of the redeemed and what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

....you remember it, of course you do, the story I told you -- there in the villages (India is 90% made up of villages) the towns-people would gather around, whether they were Christian or not, and the non-Christians in particular would stand on the periphery -- oh, they'd listen to what the preacher would say, and they'd make note of the fact that some of these people in there were committed Christians, but they'd judge them, not by what they were hearing but the way they dealt with one another, by the way they behaved.

Jesus Christ, even in this passage of Scripture from which this text is taken, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." And we Christians, followers of Jesus Christ, are quick to say, that's an im-

possible dream! It just isn't practicable to be that committed to Jesus Christ.

Sometime ago when I conducted a preaching mission in the southern part of Virginia I was privileged to meet with the pastors of the community. One of them of the United Methodist Church, and in the course of our conversation in a relaxed manner he rather facetiously remarked about that part of the Methodist Book of Discipline, when a candidate for the Ordination in the Gospel Ministry appears before the Bishop. The Bishop is constrained to ask him a question, which at one time went to the very heart of Methodism. The question is this: "Are you striving after perfection?" -- and the Bishop half-apologized for asking that question as though it was unreal. He said, "I suppose I have to ask you this question -- it's in the Book." But then he retrieved the situation very beautifully and he said, "As I ask you, are you striving after perfection, I must also ask you, if you are not striving after perfection, after what are you striving?"

If you haven't an earnest desire to become better than what you are, what is your earnest desire? One of the things that I say to the people who become part of the New Members Group is this, that I would earnestly pray that your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ through the people of Saint Luke Church would find you, months from now, if a year, better in your commitment to Jesus Christ than you were before you came to us.

Now I don't know how you're going to rate this sermon. I'd be very happy if it shakes you up a bit, if it makes you a bit more conscious of the fact that Jesus Christ is a demanding person. You're entitled to know that every sermon that you hear I try out on this preacher for six before you get it, and unashamedly I tell you, albeit a bit reluctant, I've saved it until now, that when I face Judgment, one of the things that perhaps will trouble me more than anything else is that I'll look back over certain chapters in my life when I failed to take Jesus

Christ as seriously as I should. And perhaps that's the besetting sin of all of us, our unwillingness to take Him seriously, especially when He tells us that He expects more from us than He does from other people. But I wouldn't want a Saviour who couldn't be as demanding as that.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"ON FINDING GOD INCREDIBLE"
(Acts 12:15)

GRACE, MERCY and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son, Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

The preacher under whom I grew up looked perpetually like a solemn occasion. No matter where you would see him, in church or out of church, he always had a very serious countenance. He was an exception, because I believe that most preachers thoroughly enjoy telling a joke, or hearing one. The only people that I know who enjoy telling a joke more than a preacher might be people who know a joke that they can tell a preacher.

The joke that I've heard repeatedly through the years has to deal with a preacher, of course. He was driving along a country road and when he came to a lonely stretch he discovered he was having a flat tire, and he pulled over to the side of the road to give it the attention it required.....

....there he was, black suit, white collar, shiny shoes, on his way to conduct a church meeting, being delayed by this inconvenience. He struggled along trying to get the wheel free, but there's one stubborn lug that just can't be released. In his desperate plight somebody's passing by, stops to give him a measure of assistance. He too has difficulty in getting that one stubborn lug released.....and then it's at this point that the preacher suggests to his new-found friend that since they've tried everything else, that maybe they ought to pray, and he encourages the fellow to offer a prayer. The fellow doffs his hat, bares his head, utters a prayer-of-sorts, and then grabs the tire iron and vehemently

goes back -- and just like that the lug comes off! ...and the preacher, startled, says, "Well I'll be ()!"

...(you can finish the sentence according to your own imagination).

We haven't lost the point. The preacher who had suggested the power of prayer is absolutely amazed when he discovers that it works. But I suggest to you as I come to this sacred desk this morning that that's a very real problem for some of us. We say we believe in prayer, we say we believe in the power of God to work miracles, and then, lo and behold, when God does, we find it difficult to believe!

The title for today's sermon is "On Finding God Incredible" -- and the text is the 15th verse of that amazing, exciting chapter, the 12th chapter, of that amazing, exciting book known as the Acts of The Apostles. Here is the text:

"But Peter continued knocking; and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed."

Now let me give you the background. Peter was on their most-wanted list. The enemies of Christ had him as a wanted man. They'd already done away with James, the brother of our Lord, and they'd gotten Herod the King to issue an order that Peter was to be imprisoned, with of course the execution to follow. This is what they did. They put him in prison alright, then they assigned four guards to watch over him. Two were stationed at the door, and then one was stationed on either side of him. And he was chained to both of them.

....meanwhile, as you might expect, a group of Christians were doing exactly what Christians should do -- they were his friends, and they gathered together in a certain home and they prayed. They prayed very earnestly. And I'd like to think that they prayed in this manner:

"God, you can do anything. God, Peter is our friend, we need him. The church is just beginning to grow. We can't get along without him. God, don't you let Herod get by with this. God, we need Peter. Take care of him. Don't let anything happen to him . . ."

....surely that's the way they must have prayed. And while they were praying,

what do you suppose was happening? God was getting into action! He sent an angel, with a great light -- startled Peter, got him awake, told him to put on his coat, and took him out of jail. And Peter did the only thing that Peter could do under these circumstances -- as soon as he could get there, he went to the place where they were having the prayer meeting. And he knocked at the door.

...now get the humor of this. If you don't mind, honestly now, see the humor in it. Wonderful as it is, he's knocking at the door, and the gal who answers the door is so surprised she can hardly do anything -- she doesn't even open the door! -- then she goes and tells the other people and they say, "You're mad". -- -- God has answered their prayer -- -- and they're startled...they find it incredible.

Now I'm going to suggest to you that this is a very real problem for some of us. It isn't that we don't believe in prayer. It isn't that we don't believe in miracles. But occasionally when God takes us seriously and hears our prayer and begins to answer it, we just don't believe that it's possible.

I think this may be true for two reasons. The first reason is this: we just don't believe that God's going to answer immediately. You see, our track record has been such that all too often God in His wisdom delays answering us, because far more important than the answer that God gives is the experience that we have to encounter. So occasionally God in His wisdom may not give us immediately what we're asking for. There are some lessons that we have to learn in the meanwhile, and God gives us time to master those lessons. So, like as not, we've had to wait. But just because we've had to wait doesn't mean that if God sees fit, that He's incapable of acting immediately.

Now, I think I have to tell you this, that God doesn't always answer our prayers favorably. After all, look what happened to James. They did away with him. But there are times when God sees fit to give us exactly what we're asking

for. And He won't waste any time in getting it done...so that you and I need to bring to Him the expectancy, the full measure of faith that allows us to believe that He will do it, and that as He sees fit, He'll do it now.

I smile when I think about the story that's told about a group of farmers who are distressed because they hadn't had rain for weeks. Their crops were at stake. There isn't anything more perishable, so to speak, than an unproductive crop....if you have missed a harvest you've missed a harvest. Some of them were God-fearing, so they suggested to the preacher that he might open the doors of the church and they could have a special meeting, a prayer session, in which they would implore Almighty God to answer their prayers and to send down rain from the heavens. Well the preacher, as you might know, obliged them and he scheduled the prayer meeting. So they came. And as he began the opening session, made some comment....and then he threw them for a loop -- he jolted them. He said, "Before we begin to pray, let me see the hands of those of you who have brought your umbrellas." There wasn't much of a showing -- really there wasn't! Yet they came to ask God to do the very thing that they believed that He could do. But they weren't prepared to accept the fact that He could do it immediately.

I think there's a second reason why we're reluctant to believe that God can act immediately or that He will answer our prayers favorably. It's because, that we can't quite recognize the way He's about to answer our prayers. We're an arrogant lot, honestly we are, and occasionally when we pray we presume to tell God exactly how He ought to answer. And when God answers in some unconventional way we're jolted.

I find a special measure of satisfaction sometimes in remembering about Browning and his Archbishop. Do you know about Browning and his Archbishop? Bless Browning, he used to tell about the Archbishop who donned his ecclesiastical vestments and walked reverently down the sacred aisle to approach the altar in order to address Almighty God. And in the utmost tones, reverent and stentorian,

he began: "Eternal God . . . "and there was a voice from Heaven that said, "Yes --?" They found the Archbishop dead before the altar -- frightened, completely awe-struck. The God in whom he believed, the God to whom he spoke -- answered! And he wasn't made ready to accept the fact that God hears and God answers.and occasionally immediately and directly!

One of the lamentable things to be said about us is we ask God for something -- we're arrogant enough, let me say it again, presumptuous enough, to tell God exactly how He ought to answer. We blue-print it, we suggest a strategy, we anticipate a procedure. And God doesn't have to answer our prayers the way we tell Him they ought to be answered. God is far wiser than we. And thanks be to God that He doesn't always answer our prayers the way we expect them to be answered.

I suggest to you that in all likelihood when these people were praying, they had in mind that God would encourage a bunch of revolutionaries who would storm the very fortresses, who would go in with power and might and get Peter out just like that! -- with armed forces. That's the way they probably told God that He ought to do it. Well God didn't use that method.

So I have come to this sacred desk to suggest to you that maybe you ought to school yourself in the fine art of getting ready for God's favorable answer. A lot of preachers I know have to spend a great deal of their time trying to tell their people how to brace themselves when God says No to their prayers. Well you recognize it by this time, don't you, the purpose of this sermon is to get you ready to accept a Yes answer. And when it comes, to recognize it.

You know that I pray for you. You know that I pray for Saint Luke Church and its people and its program. Surely you know that. And every now and then I take myself to task because it's only afterwards that I look back and see how God was already answering prayers that I was offering. It's only sometimes afterward that I look back and see how God was making some of you ready by which the prayer that I was offering to Him was being answered, and I was insensitive to

it, I was blind to it all the time this was happening! God is forever active! God is forever concerned about us. God is always wanting to give us some good thing. And all the while when He's doing it, we may be blind to the fact that He's at work.

If I wanted to I could turn our coming together this morning into a good old-fashioned testimonial meeting where some of you could stand up and say, "Here, let me tell you about this - - -". No sooner was the benediction pronounced at 8:30 and the recessional hymn sung and I was standing at the back of the Nave, than a man who sat a third from the front came to me and said, "Pastor, when you have five minutes' time, let me tell you how God surprised me." Well, He is that kind of a God. He's always working in our behalf.

So I've a suggestion for you if you don't mind: when you turn to Him, prayerfully, and you ask Him for something, then ask Him by the Holy Spirit to keep your soul alert to recognize the answer - - to keep your soul sensitive that when His answer looms on the horizon, no matter when nor how, you may recognize it. There are many blessings that we're missing right now, honestly there are, because we're blind to the goodness of God.....now. This I most certainly believe.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"GOD'S MAN FOR THE ROAD"
(Luke 18:31)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

It was a day as clear and as crisp, as fresh and as fair as this, last September when Winifred and I, enjoying a respite amid the hills of home, decided to do something that we had planned on doing for some time. About ten o'clock in the morning we got her sister, her brother-in-law and Grosmutter -- 90 years of age at that, bundled her up, and we all got in the car. We said, we'll just drive rather aimlessly, wander around these hills of home until we decide to come back in late afternoon.

Every now and then as we would ride along, I can hear Winifred or Karl ask - - "I wonder where that road goes?"...and then much to our surprise, it was Grosmutter who might enlighten us, she might recall for us some experience, some event, or the occasion that took her that way.

Roads, I suggest to you, are fascinating. Some of us find them intriguing. You may recall that when Winifred and I came back to you from that special assignment several years ago, and we reported to you as a congregation, we shared with you some slides. And occasionally on the screen we would throw the picture of a road, a path, a trail or a highway.

I'm about to tell you now something that I honestly believe: the history of the human race is the history of a road. You can't separate roads from history. Think for a moment, the changes that have been made in the course that history has taken because a man named Hannibal plotted a particular course....a man named Marco Polo decided to go where he went.....a man named Christopher Columbus planned for himself a brand new route that others had not taken presumably. As far as we're concerned, you can't divorce the Christian faith from certain roads.....

.....we have what we have because one day a carpenter took to the road with the lady of his heart and headed toward Bethlehem. We've divided history because of the event that took place by the traveling of that road to Bethlehem.....

.....the world has never been the same since Jesus took that road that led to Nazareth - - and the road that led away from Nazareth!

.....the world has never been the same since what happened on that road to Emmaus.....

The history of the human race is the history of the road, this one or that one.

I make bold to suggest that you could write the history of your own life according to the road that you have taken. If it's a title that you want for today's sermon, I am pleased to give it this title: "God's Man For The Road." It's inspired by that Gospel Lesson that we used to use regularly on the Sunday next before Ash Wednesday, the 18th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke, the 31st verse:

"Jesus turned to the twelve and said, Behold,
we go up to Jerusalem."

Now with whatever sanctified imagination that you have, don't hesitate to exercise it, and move from the classic King James translation, let me interpret it for you this way.

I can visualize it quite easily - - our Blessed Lord called together this company of disciples, saying to them, "I suppose you wonder why I've called this meeting. But there's something that I want to tell you - -

" . . . I've made a decision. And after I tell you about this decision you may be inclined to talk me out of it. But don't try. My mind is made up. Ever since we have been together for three years we've wandered about, in and out of Galilee, in and out of Judea. But now I tell you the time has come and we're going to go to Jerusalem -- it's settled in my mind

" . . . Some of you will be pleased to go to Jerusalem -- you'll get all excited. For us there is no city in the world quite like Jerusalem. And you can count on it - - we will be traditionalists, we'll observe the ancient Jewish feast of the Passover. But in the meeting that you and I are having together now, I want to tell you something. After that meal, all hell is going to let loose -- you might as well know it -- it's not going to be a pleasant journey. It's going to be an ugly trip! And by the time it's all over they'll kill me

" . . . oh, I'd like to think that you'd interfere -- Peter, I can see exactly what you're going to do, but hold your fire. Don't try it. It will be of no use. But I want to tell you something -- there's going to be a third day! And I'll leave the grave empty!

" . . . Oh, I can see it on your faces now, you haven't the slightest idea of what I'm talking about, but I have to tell you. When some day you can look back and remember that I did tell you, you'll know why I'm talking to you the way I am right now "

Well, that's the way you can read -- between the lines, if you don't mind -- the classic expression: "Behold, we're going to go up to Jerusalem." - - - "Behold - - - ".....the decision has been made.

You're aware of that, aren't you, that God holds us responsible for the decisions that we make regarding the road that we take through life. Some of us have found that our lives have been changed just because we've made the decision to travel in the direction that we did. Our lives would have been entirely different had we taken another route.

It's coming to your mind, isn't it, I can see the words forming on the lips of some of you -- Robert Frost expressed it magnificently:

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood;
And sorry I could not travel both,
and be one traveler.
Long I stood and looked down one
as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other;
As just as fair and having perhaps a better
claim because it was grassy and wanted wear.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence - -
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."

Intriguing? Fascinating? -- the roads that lie ahead. Some of them are very, very inviting. Some are forbidding -- there's a sign that says NO TRESPASSING. Some have signs that say you travel at your own risk.....some say, "This is a temporary route. Due to circumstances you are forced to take a detour"....as much as to imply, we're warning you, there is a better way. For the time being you're obligated to take this route.

But that isn't what troubles me so much. What concerns me primarily now is that we have a choice on occasion. And God holds us responsible for the route that we take. May I suggest to you a kind of a Christian guideline that could hold you in good stead when the decision has to be made: Come wind or weather, follow the example of Jesus Christ, who took the road to Jerusalem because He made the decision on the basis of the knowledge it was God's will. As Christians we have a right to believe that God can impart to us, by faith, the direction in which we ought to travel.

If you don't mind, I'll suggest to you another guideline. Like as not that road is to be determined by the great good that will come into the lives of other people because we took that route! You know very well that there are times when some of you have come to see me because you had to make a decision. You have two job opportunities - - and you wrestle with it -- which one should you take?

I recall so well the man who came to me and said, "Pastor, you might as

well hear me out, but I think I know what I'm going to tell you after you've told me what you'll tell me - - I'm going to take the one that will bring the greater good to my family. I can't be selfish." Well, we're all part of the family, if not as sons and daughters and brothers and sisters and wives and husbands -- we're part of a greater family. And the Christian directive is that when you travel down the highway of life, make sure you go in the direction that can bring a greater good to other people.

Happy indeed is that man who has traveled any distance who knows that because he's traveled that road people have been blessed because he came their way.

The second observation that I make regarding this: Jesus not only says, "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem" - - He also predicted what was going to happen, but you allow that to be turned into some blessing. He knew what was ahead. You and I do not always know. But as Christians, by the grace of God we can take what happens to us -- by the power of God fashion it to some good!

Another observation: He said "We're going up to Jerusalem." He was willing to believe that they would go with Him. It was no fools' paradise for Him - - He knew that when He went they'd be following along. "You have been with me now for three years. You made a commitment - - I'm assuming that you're not going to opt out now. All right, I'm going, and you're going with me."

Which leads me to say to you as strongly as I can, that no man ever travels the road of life -by himself. You and I may think that we do. But there are always other people around -- people that we meet going and coming. And occasionally people who will follow after us just because they see the way we're going.

That's an awesome thought. To the day I die I'll give thanks to God for people that He put down in front of me, and in a very winsome way they drew me after them....and I have been better for it....

.....to the day I die I'll curse certain people that I met along the highway of life who brought an untoward effect on my soul, that I at the time was not fully aware was happening. But it occurred just because our paths crossed.

No man travels the road of life by himself. The lengthened shadow of his life eventually is cast here and there and falls upon others.

It is an awesome thing to be able to make a decision and then to discover that you've made the wrong one. There's always the temptation on the part of every single one of us to go far on the wrong road, and it does happen. As significant as any relationship that I have had with the young people of this parish used to come -- that is, beyond Confirmation experience -- it used to come when I would meet with high school seniors just before graduation. We'd gather them together in small groups in our lovely retreat house which is Bethany. We'd share a meal together, we'd sit in the living room and we would talk. And I recognized the responsibility that rests upon me as the shepherd and bishop of their souls to point out to them that they were approaching a period in their life when most of the decisions with which they would have to deal, they'd have to make personally. By the time they were through senior high school a good many major decisions of their life had been made for them by other people. But now they'd be pretty much on their own. Some simple choices, such simple decisions.....

-- do I live in a sorority house, a fraternity house,
or don't I?

-- do I live at home, or don't I?

-- do I share an apartment with three other girls -- three
other fellows -- or don't I?

-- do I major in this, or do I major in that?

-- how do I make my money go as far as I'd like to have it

go, and what will I spend it on?

-- in whose company will I spend most of my time?

-- who will I allow to be the person who will claim
my heart?

Life is always putting in front of us the necessity to make a decision. The history of your life and -the history of my life is the history of the road that we take.

In that movie "The Immigrants" - - I can see it now: the father and the mother and the rest of the family standing there in the doorway of their own house.....realizing that those whom they have loved and will continue to love as long as they live, they have reared and trained them in the faith, but they have made the decision that they will no longer stay home -- they will take to the road. And as they put all of their earthly belongings in that wagon, they slacken the reins, the horse heads down the lane.....and I can hear the old father calling out: "Go slow as you drive through the gate at the end of the lane"....as much as to say to himself, they're on their own! Will they remember the direction in which we faced them? - - will they remember that they trust Jesus Christ, who said, "I am the way -- no man comes unto the Father but by me."

The words of that song, remember --

"One sweetly solemn thought comes to me
o'er and o'er:

I am nearer home today than I ever was before."

.....will each day's journey led them in that direction?

John Oxenham said, "To every man there openeth a way/ And ways, and a way/
And the high soul climbs the high way/ and the low soul climbs the low/ And in
~~And we see, high and low~~ flats/ The rest drift to and fro/ But to every man there
openeth a high way and a low/ And each man decides the way his soul will go."

If we take the wrong road occasionally and we get off the track -- that's exactly why some of us keep coming back to this place Sunday after Sunday, because here's where we get re-oriented -- here's where we're told all over again that we weren't meant to head for hell....but Heaven is our destination.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"FELLOW-TRAVELER: PETER"
(Mark 14:29-31)

QUIET our minds and hush our hearts, O
God, and by Thy Holy Spirit enable us
to better understand the writing of the
sacred page. Amen.

Today's sermon, to be properly understood, must be seen against the background of last Sunday's meditation. You may remember, it bore a title: "God's Man on The Road." And the truth was dealt with that the history of the human race can be seen as the history of a road. And it's particularly true of the Christian Faith. You can't think of the Christian Faith without thinking of certain roads that were taken, and the directions in which God had His people move. The history of the Christian Faith is the history of the road to Bethlehem....the road out of Nazareth....the road to Jerusalem... the road to Bethany....the road to Emmaus....the road to Damascus.

Your personal history, your own biography, is the history of the path that you have taken, to God's House....to a baptismal font....to a sacred altar. Your personal history is the history of the road that you take in the name of Jesus Christ to where you live, where you work, to where you enjoy your pleasure.

If it is important that we should deal with the direction in which we move, it is equally significant that we should make much of the fact that it's not only where you travel to, it's also with whom you may travel. And so for the remaining weeks in this Lenten season we'll talk with some of the fellow travelers who accompanied Jesus Christ.

And if it's a title you'll be wanting for today's sermon, it's "Fellow Traveler: Peter"and if it's a text that you will be needing, and most

certainly you will, it's from the 14th chapter of the Gospel according to Mark, verses 29 to 31:

"But Peter said to him, Even though they all fall away, I will not. And Jesus said to him, truly I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times. But Peter said vehemently, If I must die with you, I will not deny you. . . "

You and I know full well that we have been influenced by the people with whom we associate. Some of us have had our lives changed because at a certain point in the road we met someone, or we associated with a particular group of people, and we have never, never again been the same. It's significant to note that when our Blessed Lord took that road out of Nazareth and spent those three years as an itinerant preacher, He began by looking for recruits, disciples, a chosen company. He knew full well that while He would come preaching, the Kingdom of God would not be established simply because He proclaimed it. A foundation would have to be laid. And after He had finished His stint for His Heavenly Father, there would be others and they would extend the Kingdom even unto the uttermost parts of the earth. So I can see Him now as He went from place to place, looking for this promising person and that person.

Interestingly enough, as we think of Jesus on the road, there's that precious passage of Scripture that says: "And he chose them that they might be with him . . . " No man travels the road by himself. And we are dependent upon those who accompany us, who allow us to benefit from the cross-fertilization of mind and spirit, as occasionally we stop in the journey and deal with one another, draw inspiration from one another, and the benefit that comes from mutual companionship. Remember it and remember it well, even the Son of God saw the necessity to have people with Him. That's a precious passage -- He chose them, that they might be with Him.

And among that group, twelve in number, there was this man named Peter.

That's the first thing I can tell you about him. This fellow traveler -- he was one of twelve.

God has a way of pointing at a man and saying, "I need you!" -- in the way that He may point that finger to that man as He may not point it to many others. There is such a thing as the called and the chosen.

The second thing that I can tell you about him, he was not only one of twelve, he was also one of three. To use the phrase, he was one of the inner circle. Occasionally Jesus Christ would look at Peter, He'd give him a beckoning glance, a nod, wave the finger in this way and say, "Come along, Peter -- come along with me....and when you see James and John, tell them to come too. I want to tell you something. I want to share something with you. I want you to experience something that maybe the others won't be able to appreciate."

...I don't think it's too much to suggest that He may have talked that way. And does that mean He showed partiality?

Of course it doesn't.....

I'm inclined to believe that there are those who have a measure of spiritual sensitivity that others do not have. Not that the others are less committed -- don't you dare read that line wrong! But there are some folks who are more akin to spirit than others.

We are deeply grateful here in Saint Luke Church for the commitment of all of our people. But I know very well, as you know it, that there are some folks who respond with a sensitivity that others do not respond with. There are some folks who will advance their interest even before the formal announcement is made -- not that the others are less committed. It wasn't partiality -- bear with me when I say it was a kind of natural gravitation which drew them to Him.....and could one be bold enough to say: and drew Him to them?

Among the interesting assignments that I've enjoyed through my years has been the opportunity to serve as a leader for study groups to Europe and the

Middle East. I remember the second one.....there were 21 in number in the group. We were to be gone for six weeks. When we embarked in New York City I think for the most part they were total strangers. But it was interesting to discover, even within a week. how some of them began to cluster -- these two would be found together, these three would be off in that corner, talking.....or perhaps when we had our evaluation sessions after each lecture, and each place that we visited, this one might speak up and then look to one other person as he might not look at any other person for support for what he had just said or the question that he had asked.

....well, that's the second thing to be said about Peter:

he was one of three. He was one of twelve, was the first thing.

The third thing that needs to be said about him is this: he is, I dare say, the best-known of all the twelve. More is written about Peter than any of the others. And that could be true for several reasons.

One, he was perhaps the first of the group to speak -- highly opinionated and impulsive. And there's something to be said for that kind of a person. I've conducted enough group sessions where I have been pleased when somebody broke the silence and was the first to speak, and primed the pump and got the thing moving. Peter served that kind of a purpose, too, in the company of the twelve.

What else can I tell you about him?

He's not only the best-known of the twelve, he's the most popular with you and me. Of all the twelve, we find that he's a reflection of certain traits and characteristics that we have.....or we're a reflection of his traits and characteristics. He was nobly intentioned -- yes, he was. He was the man not only with the big mouth but with the big promise.

We encourage the youth of this parish to be nobly intentioned. We spell it out for them very clearly in the Confirmation rite that we have adapted

in our own way here at Saint Luke, when no matter how large the class, they come two-by-two to the altar and stand within the shadow of that altar, and then we introduce a question in the rite of the Church:

"Do you love the Lord Jesus and do you promise
to serve Him through His Holy Church?"

...and there are some of you within the hearing of my voice right now who remember how you answered -- nobly, and I dare say, honestly:

"Yes, with my whole heart."

Peter was that kind of man. You and I like to think that we're that kind of person -- nobly intentioned.

But Peter was also the kind of a man who would trip himself up occasionally. He was the kind of a person who had to be rebuked by the Master. As you listened to Mr. Stellhorn reading the Lesson this morning, that is, the Gospel, you remember how Jesus rebuked him sternly, used such strong language -- "Why, you're like the devil to me! No more of this talk!"

...well, occasionally you and I find the Master clipping our wings, and rebuking us. And we draw a measure of comfort in the realization that He would do that to Peter.

Peter was pleased with his halo. You and I are pleased with ours. We like to think that we're numbered among the select ones. We know a measure of pride in thinking that we're Christian. But Peter's halo would fall to the dust every now and then. He'd try to straighten it out and put it back on....he'd get it a bit tilted, and you could see that it was torn.

....well, that's the way it is with us, too. That's one reason why some of us are back here right now! We want to get that halo back on . . . it fell off since last Sunday.

These are the things I can tell you about Peter.

But far more important, what I can tell you about his Master -- the man who chose him as a fellow traveler.....the man who said, "Peter, I need you."

....the man who said, "Come after me, and stay with me - - now we're going to go up to Jerusalem"

Far more important than what's to be said about Peter is what we say about Jesus Christ. Again and ever so often, while Peter gave Jesus Christ cause to become impatient with Him -- and there were times when he did! -- but never do you have Jesus Christ saying to Peter, "I made a mistake, Peter, you're not the promising material that I thought you to be, and I'm tired now of trying to get you straightened out! Peter, you can have your severance pay . . . we'll call it quits!"

.....He never once said that to Peter.

God's-man-on-the-road was making an investment in Peter. That's why He kept him with Him. You learn a lot while you travel. In the book "Zen And Motorcycle Maintenance" the college professor who took time off from school and took his young son with him to ride along on the motorcycle -- what it really is is the story of a journey through life, the things with which they had to deal and the lessons they learned along the way....and what the professor was able to teach the youngster just because he was traveling with him. And there's a line in the book that goes something like this: "Sometimes it's better to travel than to arrive, because of the lessons you learn while you're traveling." And so Jesus Christ kept Peter with Him on the road, and kept making this investment in him.

While Peter stumbled, faltered and fell again and again, Jesus Christ was always within reach to give him the necessary re-orientation and to say, "Stick close by." I suppose a student of psychology would say, "Jesus, you've flunked the course! It was a very unwise thing for you to say to Peter, as you did in the text for today's sermon: "Peter, you're going to deny me. I don't care what you tell me - - you're going to let me down, and the final chapter is going to be written, you won't be supportive -- I know that, Peter'"

....any student of psychology would say to you, you don't talk to people like

that! - can't you understand, you're giving him a reputation to live up to!
How do you draw the best out of a man when you magnify the worst side of his nature?

Ah, but don't you understand, when Jesus said to Peter, "You're going to deny me, I know it, Peter" - - but Jesus is also giving him to understand:

"Peter, you may deny me, but listen -- I'll
never deny you, Peter."

And you're not forgetting, are you, that in the post-Resurrection chapter, so gloriously written, what does Jesus say? - - "Go and tell my disciples, and Peter - - I have never given up on him."

And I would like to think He would have said the same thing to Judas, had Judas been around to hear it.

I stayed up last night and saw the ending of "Red Shoes" - Hans Christian Andersen's classic. You know the story. You know how it ends. Let me refresh your memories, nonetheless....

....Vicki, the adorable one who wanted more than anything else
to dance, finds in her journey through life that two men
make a claim upon her life. Two men love her, each in his
own way. But each loves her for the purpose that she can
serve in his life, for what she can give to this one -- for
what the other one can take from her life.....

Unashamedly I fought back the tears when I saw the way the story ended, as she throws herself in front of the oncoming train and commits suicide. For her a journey through life was such that she couldn't cope when she had to deal with two men who in the final analysis had met her along the road of life in order to take.

When you and I meet the Master of men along the highway of life, He doesn't meet us for what He can take from us. He calls us to stay with Him for what He can give us. And as we stay with Him and as we receive from Him,

and as He makes one investment after another, our lives are transformed, and this, the vascillating one, becomes the man to whom Jesus can say: "You're like a rock, and upon you and your kind I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

Gamil Kebran, the Lebanese, God bless him, in his "Prophet, and Other Writings" - - doesn't he tell about Jesus and Mary Magdalene...and aren't these the words that are found in that magnificent page as he speaks of the Magdalen: "Men love you, for what you can give to them, for what they can take from you."

....says Jesus to the Magdalene, "I love you for
what I can give to you."

....no wonder she became a living miracle.

Stick close to Jesus, my friend. He draws near to us on the highway, the journey that we take through life, and He wants always to make an investment in us, an investment that returns a magnificent dividend.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"GOD'S MAN-ON-THE-ROAD --
FELLOW-TRAVELER: ANDREW"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Surely by this time you've caught the theme of the sermons being preached on the Sunday mornings during Lent. We're going back to the concept that life is a journey. We began two weeks ago with that significant text, the words of Jesus Christ as He spoke to His disciples:

"Behold we go up to Jerusalem - - "

...He took to the road.

The history of the human race is the history of a road. Your life and my life has been determined very largely by the directions in which we move, the choices of the road that we make. And last Sunday we tried to establish the thought that it's not simply enough the direction in which you move, it's also the people with whom you associate along the way. And last Sunday we thought about a fellow-traveler of Jesus Christ, a man named Peter.

Today it's another fellow-traveler -- if you please, God's middle-man-on-the-road, a man named Andrew. And the text is from the 42nd verse of the first chapter of the Gospel according to John:

"One of the few who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, We have found the Messiah, and he brought him to Jesus."

Andrew belongs to those who honestly believe that sooner or later on the highway of life some good thing will happen. Most of us have a way of disciplining ourselves and bracing ourselves against the untoward, the

ugly, as it may be unexpected. We cushion ourselves against the shock that could come, and in most cases most certainly has come, and taken a terrible toll. But you wouldn't to live if on the journey ahead we had nothing to expect except the ugly and the untoward. Some of us go on living day after day because we're thrilled by the prospect that some good thing will happen to us. We're encouraged because already good things have happened to us, and the one whom we follow -- why, His very name means 'goodness,' -- and we have been taught from childhood that His mercies will never fail. Happy indeed is that man who, as he travels the highway of life, keeps his antenna up, his mind alert, and his spirit sensitive for the good that's going to happen. Andrew, if you please, is patron saint of those-who-kept-themselves-on-the-alert.

I'll tell you why I tell you that. He had been told that one day God's promised one, the Messiah, would loom upon the horizon. And he went through life looking for that person. And then one day -- one never knows, you know -- and then one day there was a man by the name of John who came along, and he said something about Jesus Christ, and he spoke convincingly. And Andrew got all excited. Maybe John didn't know that Andrew was hearing these things....maybe Jesus didn't know that Andrew was hearing these things. But nonetheless, the antenna was up and the soul was on the alert. And Andrew paid attention. He's the patron saint of those-who-keep-themselves-spiritually-sensitive-and-on-the-alert. And then when he found Jesus Christ, he became excited, and he had to share the word.

I want to talk to you about this for a little while. When any good thing happens to us we can't keep quiet -- honestly we can't -- we have to tell somebody. I tell you this now quite parenthetically . . . I had the good fortune, as some of you know, to go to college during the depression years when colleges were small in their enrollment, private schools, especi-

ally, or church-related institutions. Can you imagine going to college where the total enrollment was about 300, back in depression days? Well picture the administrative office....there was a bursar, and then on the other end of the hall there was the office of the Dean and the office of the Registrar. Two women shared the suite of offices of the Registrar and the secretary to the Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences.

...the Registrar was a maiden-lady, quite up in years. The secretary to the Dean of the college was comparatively young. Everything was going along as usual until that morning when the Registrar went to the typewriter -- she had no secretary -- she took a 3x5 file card, typed a message on it, and took it and placed it on the desk of the secretary to the Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences. When the young secretary read what was written on the card, these were the words that loomed in front of her:

"Last night the Latin professor proposed to me.
It's wonderful! I just had to tell someone!"

Well I suppose I could tell you -- she'd been waiting and she'd been looking. She'd waited perhaps a little bit longer than most women have to wait. But her Prince Charming would come along. And when he came and claimed her heart, all she could say: "It's wonderful and I had to tell somebody."

I tell you, it's that way with our experience with Jesus Christ! Eventually He comes along the highway that you and I are traveling. There was a grand and good man who used to say to college students -- he didn't much care whether they'd hear him or not, but he was constrained to say it: "Keep on the look-out for Jesus Christ, because eventually you'll have to do business with Him. Look for Him!"

...well, bless Emily Zlepman's soul, when her Prince Charming came she recognized him and was overjoyed and had to tell somebody.....

That was Andrew's experience. He had been told that eventually Jesus Christ would appear. Every devout Jew was told to be on the look-out. And would you believe me that every time a devout Jewish mother gave birth to a male child, she offered a kind of a prayer that if it would be possible, maybe it would be her son who would be the promised Messiah. They were that sensitive to the good that might come their way, and nothing could be grander or better than that it should be God himself.

Which leads me to ask you, how alert are you to the better or the best that could come your way? Oh, the good has already come, but just don't settle for the good. Life has a way of dishing out the good to all of us. Good.....better.....best. Don't let the good be the enemy of the best, don't settle for it. I'm always sorry for people who give up their pursuit of excellence. I'm always sorry for people who will settle too easily for the mediocre. Whatever good had already happened in Andrew's life, he still craved something better. And Jesus Christ satisfied it, and he knew it!

So I am telling you, Andrew becomes the patron saint of all those who seek for some better thing . . . he's the patron saint of those who are believable. To the everlasting credit that belongs to this man, when he went and told his brother, Simon Peter believed him. He exuded that kind of integrity.

He probably was as believable as he was because his experience had made the kind of impact that it did! No matter how true may be some of the things that you and I say, there are some folks who won't follow after us in the direction in which we're being drawn because there isn't enough enthusiasm, there just isn't enough vitality. Why should they move in our direction if when we move we drag our feet and we have a lack-lustre look in our eyes? Andrew becomes the patron saint of all those who seek, of all those who keep their souls on the alert for some better thing, of all those who are eager

and willing to share it, and to tell it to somebody else.

And that's not always an easy thing, especially if you're going to follow in the footsteps of Andrew, because he didn't go and move a mile away from where he lived - - he didn't say, I'll have a better chance of being believed if I'd go to some other place. He began at home, to talk to his own brother about Jesus Christ, and for some people that's the most difficult thing in the world. We can talk to strangers, albeit . . . we can pick up a conversation with folks that we meet along the way in a bus terminal, in an airplane. We may ever lay bare our souls to them, and we'd never think of doing it to our own father....a man to his wife, or to his children. Here something exceedingly wonderful has happened to Andrew, and the first person he had to tell it to was his brother.

Now I have to tell you this about Andrew. I like to think of him as the patron saint of all those who serve as a committee-of-one. Once he had encountered Jesus Christ he didn't wait for a group of people to draw up a resolution and to say, "Here he is, the Messiah - - - all you other people listen to him." He didn't plan for a meeting or establish an organization as the "Followers of Jesus Christ." He didn't wait for that. He went into action immediately. He is the patron saint of all those who begin at once to do something about it, and don't look around to see if anybody else is going to follow in his footsteps.

I must also tell you this about Andrew - - he's the patron saint of the overshadowed. I was delighted when Dr. Stauderman chose for publication that article on Andrew that appeared in The LUTHERAN several years ago -- delighted not because he had made the selection of the article -- hear me out - - - I was delighted because he had chosen an illustrator to present the theme on both sides of the double spread. Some of you have seen that article, and on one side, standing over here all by himself, is Andrew...and

over on the other side of the page, two people -- Jesus Christ walking away, and by His side is Simon Peter. From the very beginning Andrew was overshadowed by Simon Peter. But it didn't drive Andrew to a psychiatrist's couch. Andrew did not spend his nights lamenting the fact, "I have failed -- no sooner did I introduce my brother to Jesus Christ than seemingly Jesus Christ gave him much more attention than He gave me . . . " From that moment on Andrew was the overshadowed. He never knew the joy of having Jesus Christ look at him and say, "Andrew, come on -- you're part of the inner circle!" He did that to Peter. But He never did it to Andrew.

....He never said to Andrew, "Come on! Tonight I know what's going to happen, there's going to be the transfiguration, there's going to be a voice from Heaven, and only a limited number of people are going to hear it . . . "Andrew never had the satisfaction of having Jesus talk to him like that. Andrew could never look back upon the life of the Master and His relationship with him and remember that even when He was hanging on the cross, Jesus would look all around with a searching eye and say, "Oh yes, there's Andrew -- Andrew, I want you to take care of My mother now ".....no, Andrew never had that joy of knowing that Jesus had singled him out with a measure of preference.

....to the best of my knowledge, Andrew never had the assurance that Jesus spoke to him personally and directly and said, "Andrew, I am going to offer a special prayer for you . . . " He did that for Simon Peter.

Andrew is the patron saint of the overshadowed -- of those who step aside... ..who don't much care whether they get recognition or not. For everyone who's remembered there are a thousand good people who are forgotten, who step aside. They also serve who step aside and allow God free hand with perhaps a different kind of material, a different kind of stuff. They also serve. (Transcribed as recorded)

GRACE, Mercy and peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Before the reading of the text there are two things that you need to hear. They are prefatory, and both are understandably personal.

Twenty years ago, when four of us first came into this community, you as a family, a family in God, were waiting to receive us. And that's the way it is with Christians. No matter where they may go, in all likelihood God has His family -- the Family in God -- waiting to greet them, to surround them, and to offer them Christian fellowship.

As we stayed in your midst our own little family of four became larger. One of your families became interlinked, and our little circle became exceedingly precious in the way it was not before, because of what we found in the greater Family of God which is Saint Luke Church. So you can understand why if in this service today I treat you all as family, in the greater sense of the word.

And that understandably leads to the second thing that has to be said. In the next-to-the-last funeral service that I conducted, as I was about to speak, there in front of me was a boy and a girl, the grandchildren of the woman for whom the service was being conducted. And suddenly it occurred to me as I stood there, if those two children couldn't understand what I was about to say, then perhaps all that I would speak would be somewhat meaningless. And I did my best, by the grace of God, to adapt the Christian message, which is meant to be a message of consolation and courage, to their level.

Today I find myself standing in front of two boys, and all that I would like to say I am constrained to say to them, and hopefully in a measure that they might understand, because they are not strangers to this place. They know full well that whoever stands in this sacred desk must proclaim the Word of God. And there's always a text, and both of them will be pleased to learn that the text is from a page in the New Testament that was written to a young man whose name happens to be the name of one of them. In First Timothy, the first chapter, the fourth verse, these words are written:

" . . the ordered living which results from faith in God . . "

When people think of creation, when God made the world, He made a wonderful world from the very beginning. He knew exactly what He wanted to do, so He did one thing at a time, then He went on to the next thing, and the next thing, and the next thing. It was all like a picture in which every part had its place.....at the right time and in the right way. It wasn't haphazard, it wasn't cluttered. Everything was right in order.

God likes to find people who can be like that. Because God gives us so much time here on earth, and there are so many things that have to be done and they are never done unless they're done in an orderly way, in order to get them done in the best possible way. The one whom all of us came to love in a very special way was a man who ordered his life, day by day, doing the things that had to be done in the right way. In fact, you know that for thirty-one years he gave his life, his day's work, to trying to see that there was order in our society. He was a police officer. He wanted people to obey the laws and to do things just right.

But he also thought of himself as somebody who was serving his Heavenly Father. He was baptized, just as you were baptized. He was confirmed in the Christian Faith, just as one day you will be confirmed in the Christian Faith. And when you're confirmed in the Christian Faith it means that you're going to walk in the footsteps of Jesus -- to order your life after the life of Jesus Christ. That's what he did. And that's why now, when we think of him, we think of him as a man who ordered his life in a way that pleased God.

Now you live that kind of a life only when you remember, day by day, that you belong to God. And I'm happy to tell you what you already know, that's what he taught your Uncle Les....that's what he taught your Mommy - - that each day you do the things that are right in God's sight. You order each day the way God wants it done.

A good life like his just doesn't happen. It happens because each day you ask your Heavenly Father: What is it You want me to do next? His was a life of faith and trust. And when we obey God and we come to the end of our earthly pilgrimage, God says, you get a reward - - you get Heaven - - and you can always be with Me, and I'll wait for you so one day you can join Me.

One of the lessons we have to learn in life is that nothing is ever ours to keep forever. Even in baptism we allow ourselves to believe that we belong to God, we're always His. Sometimes here in this world we try to hold off, but God says Not always - - some day it will have to be completely Mine. But when you love those who are Mine, they are not taken away from you.

What we have to remember now is not what's being taken away, but

what was given to us. We did know him. . . .

"Yet love will dream and hope will trust,
Since he who knows our need is just,
But somehow, somewhere, meet we must;
Alas for him who never sees
The stars shine through his cypress trees,
Who hopeless lays his dead away,
And lingers not to see the break of day
Across the mournful marbles play;
Who has not learned the truth to sense
and flesh unknown,
That life is ever lord of death,
And love can never lose its own."

* * *

(Transcribed as recorded)

"GOD'S MAN ON THE ROAD: JOHN"
(John 19:26)

WE MAKE so little time, O God, to
do this sort of thing, to give some
measure of undivided attention to
Your Holy Word. Grant that as we
endeavor to do it now, Your Holy
Spirit may attend us. Amen.

The words of that text from that first Sunday in Lent ought to continue to ring in your ear: "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem . . ." And on that day, you may remember, we said that we'd be thinking these Sunday mornings during Lent about the general theme of "God's Man on The Road." The decision was made deliberately by Jesus Christ that Jerusalem would have to be faced. He did not casually go to that great city. Recognizing full well all that would happen, He moved deliberately, decisively, in that direction.

The thought was established in that sermon that life is like a road, and our lives are determined by the direction in which we move. In the second sermon we began to think of some of the fellow travelers with Jesus Christ as He was God's-Man-On-The-Road, and the thought was established there that it's not simply enough to think of the direction in which you move, but also some consideration must be given to the people with whom you travel.

Today is another in the series in this general theme. And the man that we consider as a fellow traveler today, having given some thought to Simon Peter, to Andrew his brother - - you're right! It's a man named John. And the text is the 26th verse of the 19th chapter of the Gospel according to John: " . . . the disciple whom he loved . . . "

As one travels through life one can meet some perfectly lovely people,

some very nice people. One also must add that as he travels through life, he can meet people the likes of which he hopes he'll never see again! But for the most part, honestly now, they are people such as you -- decent, kind, gracious, honorable. And that's one reason why some of us aren't afraid to go on living, why we're not afraid to keep to the road, because always someone such as you may become part of our company. And to the day we die we'll thank God that we met people such as you.

Always as we travel we may find some who have a certain something that others did not have. Such, I suggest to you, is the man worthy of our consideration today, a man named John. There's the appellation from the Good Book -- "The disciple whom Jesus loved" -- that puts him in a class all by himself, doesn't it? What now will you make of it? Do you deal with it uncomfortably?

I frankly admit to you that I have. I just can't picture Jesus Christ showing a measure of partiality, providing a measure of preferment to one disciple above all the others. It took a bit of doing on my part to accept that there could be such a thing as the inner circle, that on certain times Jesus would turn to His disciples and single out Peter, James and John, and away they'd go by themselves, and He'd tell them things that He wouldn't tell the others, and He'd show them things that He wouldn't show the others. And on occasion they experienced things the like of which had never been experienced before, and the others were not part of it. It took a bit of doing on my part to accept that, that Jesus Christ himself would be surrounded by an inner circle.

And having accepted it, I've had to brace myself and I would have to accept that on occasion Jesus Christ would single one out of three. It's one thing to single three out of twelve, but to single one out of three --

one out of twelve! -- that's something else! John was someone else.

But quite honestly, I can't take a pair of shears, clippers, scissors, and cut that passage out of the Bible - - - there it is! And I can't take my ball-point pen and strike it from the record -- it's there. And even if I did, I'd be forced to accept the fact that somewhere else in Scripture there is evidence that John the beloved disciple was in a class all by himself.

He's the one, you know, who when Jesus Christ looked down from the cross, as much as to say, "John, you take my place now!" - - you just don't talk like that to anyone, when you give an assignment such as He gave to John, to care for His mother Mary. You've got to be pretty sure of the person to whom you give such an assignment. Not all people could qualify.

And even if I struck that from the record, I'd still have to deal with the fact that, the night in which He was betrayed, there was one disciple who was so close that he leaned over and he put his head on the shoulder of Jesus Christ. Now you have to be someone pretty special to allow that to happen. But it did.

What now shall we make of it?

Well for one thing, I wouldn't have any of you believe that Jesus Christ loved him more than he loved the others. Jesus Christ loves us all equally. Don't ever allow yourself to subscribe to that notion, that He loved John in a way that He didn't love the others - - but, I hasten to say, John was able to respond as the others were not able to respond . . . and there are people like that.

As any preacher knows -- and there are at least three others present in this place right now who wear the cloth besides the other who is at the sacred desk - - as any preacher knows, in the preaching of a sermon, he prepares the same material and with the same ardor of soul delivers the sermon

.....but not all who are present in the congregation respond in the same way. Now that's not faulting any one of you. It's just stating a fact. There are some of you for any number of reasons who are in a position to respond as others will not respond. It's the same sermon, the same Gospel, being proclaimed in the same place. Maybe there are some people who begin with a measure of spiritual sensitivity that others do not have. Maybe so.

And that isn't necessarily to fault those who are denied it. There are some folks for whom I have a descriptive that I cannot use for any other people -- beatific -- they have a certain endowment which is characterized by their spiritual sensitivity. And I think John was one of those. And if he referred to himself or somebody else referred to him as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" -- read it that way, my friends, not that Jesus loved him more, but that John responded in a way that the others did not respond.

Now I have a notion, and I warn you, it's only a notion, I can't establish it for you factually. But I'm willing to believe that maybe John was numbered among the youngest of the disciple group. Because of his age, he had a measure of enthusiasm that the older ones did not have -- and here I am not faulting the older ones. But people who are a bit older sometimes think twice, or maybe three times, before they say Yes, or before they say No. The experience which is Life itself teaches them to be cautious. With John -- let's say he was one of the youngest -- he had the enthusiasm of youth -- -- "Let's get with it! -- Let's get going! "and every now and then when Jesus said something, it was John who gave the approving nod, without any delay. And I think this must have been very precious to Jesus Christ.

I was quite shaken on occasion when I would read in the New Testament and discover how every now and then Jesus Christ would take the disciples to task because they were so slow in believing. They would delay in falling into line. They just weren't quick to comprehend. But I am inclined to think

that when Jesus said something, it was as though He would look over to John and say, "John, you understand, don't you, John?" It was a wise professor of Education who said to the students in his class, When you go out finally to teach, you will be deeply gratified if in the classroom you can find the look on the face of just one pupil who is responsive. I think John was that kind of a disciple - - quick to respond favorably.

Oh, I'm not forgetting, he was also quick one time, with so great loyalty for his Master, that when he heard something that was untoward looming upon the horizon, he wanted that city to be obliterated from the face of the earth. He was so sold on his Master. He was so committed. I think he was that kind of person.

And bless his soul, I think he was also this type of a person, who had a propensity toward belief. He always wanted to believe. He brought this readiness to his Master. And if Dr. Rilling were standing here and lecturing to us on the Gospel of John as he's lecturing to us now these days on the Gospel of Mark, I am sure he would bring to your attention the fact that in the fourth Gospel you don't deal with ifs and ands and buts - - - in the Gospel that bears the name of John-the-Beloved-Disciple, again and again it's "We know." And I am inclined to think that if the church needs anything today, it doesn't need anything quite as desperately as it needs proclaimers of the truth of Gospel who declare it with clarity and conviction.

I smile broadly to myself when I think of the professor who was troubled when he had interruption when he was pursuing his scholarly endeavors. He was greatly annoyed by a bunch youngsters who came and played in the yard next to his garden. It was too much for him one day, so he stormed out and got control of himself, and he said, "Boys! -- you girls! -- you know what? I just heard that down on the river-bank on the edge of town, there's a great big green dragon!" That's all he had to say. That's all he wanted to say.

He aroused their curiosity, and they left the garden....

...oh, he was somewhat disturbed when they didn't head directly toward the edge of town. But he went back to his studies, only to discover shortly thereafter a lot of noise and confusion.....what had happened was the kids went down to the town square and spread the word: 'there's a big green dragon down on the river-bank at the edge of town' -- and all the townspeople start for it.....and before he realizes it, the professor's caught up with the same measure of enthusiasm, he leaves his study desk, falls in line.....and then all of a sudden he bemuses to himself and says, "Why, I just made it up! - - - but then, one never knows -- it could be true!"

....not so John! No figment of his imagination. He knew from the very beginning, and when he winds up his Gospel he says, "These things are being written that you too might know."

So John allows himself to be referred to as the "beloved disciple." And if he did, don't fault him. Not any more than you fault yourself when you say, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," -- you say Jesus loves you. If Simon Peter had written a book I think he might have put down the same thing, or allowed somebody else to say it about him. A disciple isn't worth his salt who can't say with enthusiasm and with conviction that he's loved by Jesus Christ.

I once went to a person's desk and I almost sounded a Te Deum when I saw there these words written: I AM LOVED. May I suggest to you that "He who would climb and soar aloft, must ever keep alive within his soul, the tonic of a wholesome pride." And I think we Christians dare think that way about ourselves. Buoyed and sustained by the tonic of a wholesome pride,

we are the objects of God's love, every single one of us.

Well, don't be jealous of John and his kind who are blessed with this kind of spiritual sensitivity -- be thankful. For some of us get what we have because we bask in the sunlight of their glow. And if you should be fortunate enough to be a John, to have such beatific qualities, don't ever exploit them. They are precious. Make the most of them. That's why God gave you it, from the very beginning.

Well . . . God's Man-on-the-Road had His journey a bit happier, I dare say, because He looked around occasionally and found a responsive look on the face of a man named John. . . .

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"FELLOW TRAVELER: A MAN NAMED JUDAS ISCARIOT"
(John 18:5)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Today's sermon is the last in the series based on the general theme:
"God's Man On The Road." Today's sermon bears the title: "Fellow Traveler:
A Man Named Judas Iscariot" and the text is the 5th verse of the 18th chapter
of the Gospel according to John:

"Judas, who betrayed him, was standing there."

That meant he was part of the group. You daren't forget, of course you
daren't forget, that there was a time in his life when Jesus Christ pointed
His finger at him and said, "Judas, you're my man! Come along with Me.
Join the group of twelve - - as I chose them, so I have chosen you."

When this series of sermons was begun, we dealt with the text, the
words of Jesus as He said to His disciples, "Behold, we are going up to
Jerusalem. We're going to hit the road - - we're going to travel together."
The emphasis in that sermon was laid upon the fact that a man's life is
determined by the direction in which he moves. In succeeding sermons we've
dealt with the fact that it's not simply the direction in which one moves
that's important. One must also reckon with the fact that it's also important
to realize those with whom one travels. Now, as Jesus went to Jerusalem, He
did not go alone. He took with Him the twelve disciples. It was a journey.

Any journey that one makes, he makes at some risk. I remember back in
'47 when I first decided to go overseas for two-and-a-half months. I sought

the advice and counsel of a man old enough to be my father. His immediate response was negative. He said, "You're the father of two sons. You're just beginning your ministry - - you have work to do right here in this community. To go over to Europe shortly after the war? - - to be gone for two-and-a-half months? - - any number of things could happen before you get back." He discouraged me from making the trip. I did not take his advice.

Life is a journey. And I suppose there could be those, who if they are in a position to give us any advice at all, would discourage us from going on living, because they would say, "You're bound to have one disappointment after another. There's always peril, there's always danger. Am I not correct in telling you that in the Far East they rejoice when a person dies -- when the journey is completed. They weep when a baby is born, because out of their wisdom and out of their experience they know what a perilous journey the journey of life can be. Well, I am here to tell you this morning, Jesus Christ knew exactly how it was all going to end up in Jerusalem. He also knew that as they journeyed together, by the time they got to Jerusalem and had to face the encounter that they would, the whole company of disciples would be completely demoralized....

....one of them would deny Him

....one would betray

....when the chips were down, every single one of them would have opted out.

As the Bible says, "They all forsook Him and fled." Yet every single one of them had made a commitment, every single one of them had signed up....every single one said, "We will go with you" -- and presumably, "We'll go with you all the way."

The Editor of the Jesuit weekly called America has just come out with a brand new book. It bears the very unusual title: "Should Anyone Say Forever?" The book deals with this whole business of making and breaking and keeping commitments. There are those in our generation who shy away from it. I might as well tell you, I discourage people who come to me and want to write their own marriage ceremony. When they try to present a pretty strong case to me, I say, well you go ahead and let me see it. And if you can improve on what the Church has already provided, I'll give it some consideration. I say this as kindly as I can.

One reason why I shy away from it is because it's been vogue lately to re-draft the marriage ceremony, and some people exchange their vows in this manner, when they make a promise, they say " . . as long as we both shall love." That isn't the way the Church puts it. The Church says we make these promises -- as long as we both shall live. The commitment is a lasting one.

When our Blessed Lord talked to the disciples, He didn't say, "I am going to sign you up for half of the journey." He didn't say, "I'm going to sign you up as long as the going is pleasant." He didn't say, "I'm going to sign you up as long as you can get along with each other." He said: "If any man will come after Me, let him take up his cross and let him follow Me." Let him make the kind of commitment that's meant to last, come wind or weather.

But I hasten to say it, and of course you know I'll say it, we're human. And some of you can't keep our commitments, and we break them. Maybe there's a measure of comfort for you in the realization that every single one of the twelve, before the trip was over, chickened out and broke the commitment. I have to tell you this. And if I didn't accept the Bible for any other reason, I think it would command my respect because it deals with life reali-

stically. It tells it exactly as it is: one denied....one betrayed...eventually they all forsook Him and fled.

What matters, I presume, is the intensity of our commitment. The earnest desire by which we say we're willing to sign up and stick with this thing. When Jesus Christ calls us to be His disciples, He calls us because He's willing to make an investment in us, He's willing to take the risk. Now that's what you've got to remember when we talk about this man Judas Iscariot, the betrayer.

I know what you're thinking: Why did he betray Him? Was he destined to betray his Master? I remember once in Dallas when I delivered a series of lectures on Prayer to a group of military chaplains, when I finished somebody came up to me and asked me a question and said, "I don't know why Jesus went to the bother of praying?" - - can you imagine somebody putting a question to you like that, or a comment? - - "I don't know why He went to the business of praying, because He couldn't possibly fail - - He was meant to succeed from the very beginning - - - God's perfect Son."

Well I have to tell you, in case you're inclined to think that way, when Jesus Christ took on our human flesh, He took on all of our human limitations. And that meant again and ever so often He had to decide -- willfully -- if He was going to follow the plan that His Heavenly Father laid out for Him. And you know that He even struggled there in the Garden of Gethsemane . . . He just did not automatically become good. Even Jesus Christ became good by the grace of God, and never denied Himself the element of responsibility.

Well by the same token, there are people who come to me and say, Judas -- he couldn't possibly have succeeded! He was meant to fail from the very beginning. Well, I don't buy that. I don't buy it for this reason to begin with: Jesus Christ recognized the stamp of divinity upon the fabric

of the heart of Judas Iscariot when He called him. There was something of promise in this man.

Well, let's deal with it. Why did he betray Him?

Well there are a number of reasons. I don't know which one you might accept . . . you might lump them all together and deal with some kind of a consensus on it. Let me give them to you as quickly as I can . . .

...there are some who say he betrayed his Master because he was impatient. He believed fervently in the cause...he believed in the Leader, and he wanted the Kingdom to be established. And he became impatient because Jesus Christ was losing a bit of ground. The tide now was going against Him. Judas had signed up for victory, not for defeat. And he wasn't about to see this thing happen to his Master, so he thought he'd force the hand of the Master and put Him in a position where He'd have to bring down the legions from Heaven. Well there are those who are charitable with Judas and they say he betrayed Him for this reason . . .

...there are those who say he betrayed his Master because he was avaricious -- he was greedy. When I bring the boys and girls in the Confirmation Class into the Nave and take them up to the altar, where within the shadow of that altar they'll be making their promises to the Master of Men....I say, now there they are, they're carved into wood. Let's identify some of them -- this one's John....this one's Peter.....now you find Judas. Without any delay they find Judas because he's clutching the money-bag. There are some people who say Judas betrayed because he got fed up with the fact that Jesus wasn't

much of a bookkeeper, and Jesus didn't much worry about where the next meal was coming from. There are always a limited amount of expenses, and Judas, perhaps, carrying the money-bag, had trouble making ends meet....and of course he wasn't getting anything out of it for himself, and when he had a chance to make a fast buck, there are those who say, for thirty pieces of silver he sold his Master....well, there are some people who advance that notion . . .

...there are some people who say Judas betrayed his Master because of envy. Now you remember in this series I told you repeatedly how Jesus would look for Peter, He would look for James, He would look for John -- He'd motion them to come aside, and He'd walk off with them.....and the other nine would have to fend for themselves. Never once did Judas get that kind of a favorable glance. We have no reason to believe that ever did Jesus come to Judas and say, "Judas, I'd like to talk this over with you -- I need your advice and counsel. Things didn't go too well in the last place where we had our mission. Judas, what do you think went wrong?".....there are some people whose personalities begin to blossom when somebody asks their advice and counsel, when somebody makes them feel important, because they seek them out. There are those who maintain that Jesus never gave that kind of treatment to Judas. And because human nature is what it is, when a man permits himself to think that he's being ignored or rejected or passed by, he can become very sour, and vent his feelings against the very man who has faith in him. There are those who say that's why Judas betrayed his Master -- he just couldn't take it -- he couldn't cope with the condition with which he found

himself repeatedly.....

Well, you pay your money and you take your choice. Which one was it? Maybe it was all of them. But I know one thing, whatever it was, you and I could commit it.

I also know something else: that Jesus Christ knew exactly what was in the heart of Judas. God calls evil by name, He's not insensitive to it. Even though He knew what was in the heart of Judas, He never once said to Judas, "Here's your dishonorable discharge. I won't keep you in the company any longer -- you're not fit to stay." Because Jesus Christ is the kind of person as He is, the personification of love -- love never rules out the possibility of change, and improvement.

I'll never have done with it -- it's a magnificent way of putting it -- Jesus Christ hates sin, but He loves the sinner. And because this is true, think what might have happened if Judas, exercising a measure of responsibility -- and this I also know, that when a man is stamped with evil he becomes aware of it. You and I know, honestly we do, when we've taken the wrong turn -- honestly we do! You and I know full well when we've gone too far on the wrong road. Of course we do. If only Judas would have exercised a measure of responsibility and said to his Master: "Master, I'm not all that you think me to be, or at least the impression you give the other disciples. I have a problem, Master. I am troubled by it....I need Your help . . . " We have no record that Judas ever did that. But he allowed the evil to become a cancer -- uncontrollable. And eventually he betrayed.

That's the diabolical aspect of people who are unwilling to seek help. It was right there in the heart of his Master. I can say this to you on

good authority because Peter denied - - - old big-mouthed Peter who said he'd always be faithful. But in that Resurrection chapter, who was the first person that Jesus wanted to see? -- Peter! As much as to put His arm around the Big Fisherman and say, "You're still my man -- there's still hope."

And these are the lessons that you and I have to learn from the Twelve, all of whom chickened out. And you and I do the same thing from time to time. But herein lies our hope: we have a Master who is willing to let us try again. And if Judas had not taken the back door out of life, I have reason to believe that there in the Resurrection Garden Jesus would have said, "I'd like to go and talk to Judas."

...but Judas never gave
the Master that chance. Now you think about that for a while.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE EASTER RUSH"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Resurrected Lord. Amen.

I suppose ten years have come and gone since the younger of our two sons went to the big city to complete his education. He's become quite enamored with Brooklyn and Manhattan -- he's decided to stay there for a while.

We get letters from him occasionally. He doesn't get home as often as we'd like but we keep in touch. And if it's not the letter that we get, then occasionally a telephone call. (And I have never quite figured out why, with all their learning, they have yet to discover that there's some other kind of a call besides a collect call!) And if it's not a letter or a telephone call, occasionally -- would you believe it -- he sends me an envelope with my name and address on the outside, and then on the inside a series of clippings from magazines or newspapers, clippings of cartoons. And I'm quite pleased, honestly I am, because I do believe that you can tell something about a person's character by the cartoons that fascinate him.

As though he wanted to please my fancy, one of them was the artist's sketch of a very impressive church structure. And on the church lawn, as you might surmise, there was a church bulletin board.....and on the church bulletin board there was a message, and the message read:

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

...and then the artist had two rather nondescript characters standing there facing that message on the bulletin board. The one, according to the caption, says to the other, "Too bad, really, isn't it now, that the idea never caught on!"

Well I've come to this sacred desk this morning to tell you quite frankly that God is chuck-full of ideas that have never quite caught on as far as we're concerned. He's always coming up with some new and brand new wonderful idea, but alas and alack, we're so dulled, we're so insensitive, we're so schooled to our old way of doing things that the new idea just doesn't always catch on.

Now if you and I were to ascribe -- it's risky business, I know it is -- human emotion to God, when do you think we ever gave Him enough encouragement to have a smile be drawn across that eternal face of His -- a kind of a smile that would indicate: "Well I'm pleased! At least it's catching on, some of my ideas -- some people at least get with it." I think there must have been at least two occasions when that happened, when we gave God reason to believe that we understood and that we were getting-with what He had in mind.

Significantly enough they come one at the beginning of the Gospel record and the other at the end of the Gospel record. Very quickly let me remind you of what happened that first night when the angel declared that God was going to do something that He had never done before -- a brand new idea was going to be launched on the face of the earth.....and there were shepherds outside Bethlehem, and to them the angel gave the news. They had never heard news like that before, and as soon as they heard it, the Good Book says, "They said one to another, let us go now . . . and they made haste and went to Bethlehem" -- to see what God had in mind. I think that must have pleased God, to know that there were those who at the very beginning then, got with it, and wanted to make something of what they had been told -- a brand new idea, fresh from the mind of God.

The second one well let me read it for you. It serves, the text does, as the basis for this brief meditation on this glad Easter Day. It's

recorded in the last chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew:

"And go quickly and tell his disciples . . ."

(that's the angel speaking)

"Now that he is risen from the dead, and behold
he goeth before you into Galilee. There shall
you see him. Lo, I have told you . . ."

"and they departed quickly, and went away from the sepulchre with fear and with great joy."

Well that was another time -- they're few and far between, you see, when we give God reason to believe that we're getting with it, one of His ideas is catching on. He had told them it would happen that way. And only a few now were to hear it, believe it, and get with it. The idea that was meant to catch on.

What idea? That love is stronger than hate. They had hated Him, they had killed Him. Out of pure hate they did to Him what they did. And God knew it was going to happen that way, but God says, I have a better way. I'll love them, not to death -- but I'll love them into Life Eternal. Get with it, says God -- they killed My Son. But the last enemy to be conquered is death! And that's why I communicate with you now by an empty grave.

Disciples were human people. They were drawn to the grave because they wanted to stay and endure the defeat and the humiliation of their Master. But that's not the message of Easter. The message of Easter is not that we're drawn to a grave. The message of Easter is that we're driven away from it. Easter is thrust. When at a very early hour I walked across the parking lot to head for this holy place this morning, even with the early rays of the morning light I could discover coming up through the black-top bits of green -- a weed, a blade of grass, which is the thrust of spring, which is the thrust of life....it can't be held down.

I know full well, having walked with you as long as I have through these two decades, that some of you have suffered great defeat. And again and ever so often there is always the temptation on your part to go back, and to stay where the blow struck. God says, my idea is that you don't stay there. You may be drawn back to it by sacred memory. But I give you life -- let there be the thrust that drives you away from it. Easter is not going back to where Christ was. Easter is going ahead to be where Christ already is.

You can readily understand why I tell you this. Grateful to God for these two decades that He's allowed me to be your Pastor, I've made much of that this weekend. Late yesterday afternoon I came and sat in this empty Nave, with a charming young woman who is now twenty-five years of age. Twelve years ago I confirmed her in the Christian faith. Now, after all these years, in an exceedingly wonderful way she's getting-with-it, she's understanding the power of the Resurrection, she's understanding the beauty and the majesty of Christ within her heart . . .

. . . she was absolutely unaware of it, the second one of whom I speak, looking piercingly on the back side of this Nave I could get a glimpse of her at the other service.....she too a confirmand of maybe a dozen years ago -- singing wholeheartedly the wonderful story of the Resurrection. It's a tremendous measure of satisfaction for me, as a human being, to see how here and there there are those who are getting-with-it, allowing God's idea to grip them.

God is chuck-full of great and wonderful ideas...

....such as love is better than hate

.....life is greater than death....

God is chuck-full with wonderful ideas:

"I will never leave you I will not forsake you"

"I'll always be with you Come to where I am . . .

. . . Let me strengthen you, let me sustain you . . . "

I say to you on this Easter Day, it's high time it catches on. And when it does, it will make all the difference in the world. This I most certainly believe.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"HOW JESUS CHRIST BECOMES REAL"

O GOD, we have so little time to do this sort of thing, to give some measure of undivided attention to the interpretation of Your Word. That we should make the most of it now, we ask the help of the Holy Spirit. Through Jesus Christ, Thy Son our Lord, who when He came, came preaching. Amen.

Today's sermon bears the title: "How Jesus Christ Becomes Real." The text is from the Gospel for the day, it's the 26th verse of the 20th chapter of the Gospel of John:

"Then he came and stood in their midst."

We live in a world where anything can happen, and frequently it does. Because this is God's world, there is always the possibility that whatever happens, that it should be something exceedingly wonderful. That's why we Christians can claim the Resurrection. In God's world something as wonderful as all that did occur. That's why we're here today. That's why we celebrated last Lord's Day. That's why, in the Christian faith, every time Christians come together they celebrate Easter, the presence of God through Jesus Christ in their midst. It's the transcendent truth of the Christian Gospel. Do you realize how wonderful it is? Does it empower you? Does it make you become the very ideal person that Christians are meant to be?

I'm not so sure that we draw the fullest benefit from this experience that belongs to us. There is such a thing as a lack-lustre Christian, you know. There is one who walks about, not as one empowered by the grace of God, but as one who is timid and frightened and crippled.

You know how it was in that little room where they had gathered together, huddled by fear and intimidation, afraid to face the world. Then something

happened. Jesus Christ came to them where they were. It was as though night had given way to the break of day.....darkness had made way for light...death had made way for life. That's the way our lives should be, honestly now!

But I'm not so sure, speaking very frankly with you, that all of us fully appreciate this wonderful truth. For all too many people Jesus Christ is the Man-who-was -- not the Man-Who-Is. There's a difference. For any number of people, when they think of Jesus Christ they think of Him in the past and do not recognize Him as someone who is.

Let me allow you to become privy to this kind of thing: this past week I began to schedule the series of interviews with the Confirmands. We make much of Confirmation in Saint Luke Church, as well we should. And one of the requirements remains that a child will not be confirmed who does not have a personal conference with the Pastor. So we will be having such conferences on Sundays during the month of May....we'll be talking about that with the parents when they come on Wednesday evening.

My mind went back to a conference that I had several years ago with one of our Confirmands. It was the last one of the day, it was around 8:30 or 9:00 o'clock, and then his parents very graciously invited Winifred and me to a late supper.....and I was somewhat pleased as we ate, that the lad said, "Pastor, if you don't mind, I'd like to ask you a question that I forgot to ask at my interview." I was pleased, of course I was, that he'd like to do that sort of thing, and that the thing would still carry over, but I was sorely unprepared for his question. I said, "Go ahead, ask me the question -- what is it? I'm sure your parents won't mind if we talk about it now."

He said, "Pastor, where are the bones of Jesus?"

I was flummoxed -- of course I was! A lad about to be confirmed in the Christian faith! My immediate reaction was, where have I failed? This is what it's all about! He's alive! He lives forevermore!

When you talk about the bones you talk about a dead person. This Ted has been reciting the Creed -- "He arose from the dead . . . ". He ascended into Heaven . . . He sits on the right hand of God. . . " This is what we declare in our creeds -- but maybe with our lives, we haven't caught up with our Creed as yet. Could it be as terrible as all that?

It triggered all kinds of thinking in my mind, and I thought, and I thought maybe there are any number of other people to whom I minister in the name of Jesus Christ who may not raise the question that way, but who may live by their failure to understand and to appreciate that Jesus Christ is alive!

I've searched my mind, I've tried to understand why this should be, and I've come up with a couple of answers. If you don't mind I'd like to call them to you right now . . .

-- I think some people have yet to appreciate fully the fact of an ever-living Christ because they really don't want to. It takes a bit of doing to handle a Christ who is still around. We can cope with a Christ who lived -- who did revolutionary things -- who did revolutionary things...who made demands of other people, who lived once upon a time...ago. We can handle a Christ like that....

...but to think in terms of revolutionary ways -- that's something entirely different....

And maybe this is one reason why Christ isn't as real as he ought to be to some people, because they're frightened by a real Christ.

George Bernard Shaw, the rascal, how he delighted in pricking the conscience of the Christian people. Once he implied, "You Christians, you're clever! You keep Christ on a pedestal, that's what you do, because a Christ on a pedestal is a harmless person. Unfixate him!-- let him loose in the world!-- you won't be able to handle him!" That's really what Bernard Shaw is saying to us.

Don't misunderstand me, my soul feeds on beauty. I want to mark the path that leads to a holy house where there are stained-glass windows. But anything that's nobly intentioned always carries a risk. Did it ever occur to you that we can imprison Jesus Christ in stained-glass windows?

...my soul is strangely stirred when I look at the carving of Jesus and the disciples in the panel on the altar. It's a work of art. But again and ever so often I have to take myself to task and remember that He's not there. And yet some of us are quite comfortable as long as we can freeze Him into a mould....

....I'm numbered among those who find it a necessity to mark the path so where it's made easier in a certain place to think the thoughts of God. But even to erect such walls as these carries a risk, lest we think that this is the only place where God is to be found, lest we keep Him in this place....

Let me call to your attention very severely now a rigid understanding of the Benediction. Those final words that are spoken to us just before we go from this place are marching orders, not simply a calming-down. But the Benediction, properly understood, is "Now you've got to get with it -- get away from here! You can't stay here any longer! You've got to get out where God is already, where Jesus Christ is ahead of us -- out there working! Get out there. Let this peace that you've received here now sustain you. Let it, the pardon that you've been given however you to live effectively as His obedient servant -- there!"

If I were to take you to task this morning, I think there are some people who will never such think about God. This is a terrible indictment to make, but I make it out of love. It's a risk that you and I run, that maybe this is

the only hour in the week and the only place in the week where you and I take God seriously. For shame, if this should be true!

There is another reason why God doesn't become very much real to us in our day -- it's because we can't quite see that He could be relevant. Now think of it. These two precious grandsons of ours, young as they are, they know more about this world than Jesus Christ did at thirty-three years of age. Their understanding of outer space, their understanding of certain technological things with which we have to deal amazes me. So some people, wittingly or otherwise, allow themselves to believe that this carpenter's son who lived almost two thousand years ago, who never got perhaps more than a hundred miles away from home, who traveled for the most part on foot -- how can He speak to our day? So there are some people who mark Him off, honestly there are -- what can He say to us? -- East is East and West is West, they might even add that, and the cultures are so different, let alone the gap of the centuries and all that's happened in between.

It's so different to allow ourselves to believe that He could be relevant. Let me give you a page from this book. It could be related to what we're trying to say. A couple of decades back another denomination, not our Lutherans, became upset with the notion that youngsters in Sunday School needed to understand that Jesus Christ could speak to their day, that He could become one of them. So they commissioned an artist to sketch Jesus Christ in contemporary garb, in shorts. I suppose if the artist had the same commission today, He'd put Jesus in jeans with patches too.

....they never got very far with that Sunday School literature.

There are people who said it's entirely too irreverent. And I scratch my head and I wonder sometimes, now honestly I do, if this is why the hippies went to the long-hair-and-the-beards, and the long flowing garments, and the sandals.....

.....I'm wondering if they weren't saying to us, if you can't relate Jesus Christ to us, then we're going to relate ourselves to Him -- in this way. Now you think about that for a minute.

....I saw them in Glastenbury when we were over in England, as tender a group of people that I have seen in a long time. The church-yard had allowed them to come in and rest there. One of the things that impressed me was that there wasn't a baby carriage around, but there were several babies. They were being handled tenderly, warmly.....

....I've had long thoughts about that. Not that I condone everything that they represent, God forbid -- but I know that Jesus Christ was meant to relate to us and we were meant to relate to Him. And I shudder sometimes when I think how difficult it is for us to accept this.

Please, let me tell you, I have a high and holy regard for the King James translation. It was the Scripture on which I was nurtured in the Christian faith and I'll place a high value upon it until the day that I die. But every now and then I need to be jolted by contemporary translations. I need to benefit from J. B. Phillips' way of putting it. Well, let me tell you how the old one was: "If any man be in Christ he becomes a new creation..."

...I like the way it's put in the contemporary:

"If any person is a Christian he becomes a brand new person altogether."

Well there are any number of reasons perhaps why we keep Christ from becoming real to us. I would like to suggest to you that He wants very much to become relevant. He's always marking the path to where we are -- He's never given up on us. That's another way of sublimely interpreting the Resurrection and the re-appearances that took place between the Resurrection and the Ascen-

sion, as though Jesus Christ is saying, "I haven't given up on you. I have come back . . . "

(please let me say this)

" . . . I'm going to hang around for a long, long time, even unto Eternity.

..I belong -- I belong with you. And even your death-cloths will not keep me away from you . . . "

So I've come to this desk, this sacred spot, no, as the Church says, the Second Sunday of Easter, to remind you that every time we come together we celebrate gloriously the tremendous truth -- He's alive. We worship One for whom there was no memorial service ever celebrated....we worship One for whom there is no grave.....we worship One who and is Eternal wherever we are. And He's always there ahead of us, waiting for us to get caught up with Him.

Therefore -- live no lack-lustre life. Live triumphantly! Keep in touch with Him. Let me tell it to you again -- He's alive enough to be nurtured by it, I really am -- --

-- the story of the old Methodist Bishop who was challenged by an opponent:

"How do you know that Jesus Christ is alive?"

The great old Bishop said,

"How do I know that He's alive? -- I just talked to Him this morning!"

o o o

(This cannot be described as vacuous.)

"WHAT IF - - - ?"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from
God our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

In the plethora of books being written about Eleanor Roosevelt, I'm not so sure that you'll find the quotation that's being credited to her, nor does it occur in any of the dramatic productions that bear her name, but somewhere along the line, as I understand it, Eleanor is supposed to have said, "I will not waste any time or energy in looking back over my life regretfully." That's quite a saying -- not to waste any time or energy looking back over one's life regretfully.

And yet I suggest to you, it does serve a purpose to look back over the "what if - ?" chapters in your life. And that's what I want to do at the beginning of this sermon, to suggest that every now and then you sit down very earnestly, evaluate what has already come and gone, and say to yourself how different it might have been . . . if. And then you can catalog the chapters for yourself.

Granville Keyser did this one time in one of his writings. "How different it would have been," says he, "if only you had been silent . . ."

" -- how different it would have been if only you had
promptly apologized . . .

-- how different it would have been if you had avoided
that bad investment . . .

-- how different it would have been if you'd said the
timely word . . .

-- how different it would have been if you'd stayed home

that night . . .

— how different it would have been if you had not

given up, if you had only persevered "

...and the preacher in me is quick to say: How different it might have been if only you had prayed and sought God's guidance.

Well, that's the way it is, my friend. You and I are inclined to look back across the years to the life that we've already written, to deal very earnestly with the "What if - - - ?" chapters, and how different it might have been.

I think for a moment of how different it might have been for Rusty Sather, the chap who read the Lessons for us this morning, if on that particular Sunday in the life, his parents had decided not to go to church, and if when they established residence in this area, they might have said to themselves, "Well we're away from home now. We can shift - - we can throw our lives in neutral. We don't have to identify with a Christian congregation now." --- what if they had taken that tack? Surely we wouldn't have had what we have this morning, I dare say.

Next Sunday Pastor David and I will spend time from 3:00 o'clock in the afternoon until 3:30 o'clock that night, and a couple of Sundays thereafter, in personal interviews at Bethany, our retreat house, talking to the members of this year's Confirmation Class. As I anticipate the schedule, as I told you last week, I now think of the lad who, a number of years ago in that personal interview, I said to him, "Do you really want to be confirmed?" And he told me, No. And he wasn't confirmed....

...and ever as I think of these years

that have come and gone, when if he had not said No. How different it would have been!

All this is triggered by my reading of the 19th chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. I don't know how long it's been since you read that chapter, it's really quite a chapter. There's an episode that occurs in that chapter and it's made a dent in the fabric of my mind. Let us refresh your memory.

Somewhere along the line a young man comes to Jesus Christ. He had established quite a reputation for himself, young as he was -- he had it made. He'd made a name for himself in the synagogue....he'd made a name for himself in the business world....he'd made a name for himself in the community. It looked as though he had arrived. Yet there was a void in the life of this young man and he was sensible enough to recognize it. So he came to Jesus Christ and he said, "What do I have to do yet?"

...and Jesus Christ told him. He wrote him a prescription, and in this case He said, "You have quite a bit of this world's goods. I recommend that you get rid of some of it, that you give it to people. You lack something, and this is it." Nowhere in the Bible do we have any record that the young man said, "I'll sign on the dotted line! I'll subscribe to what you recommend!" And so as I read that chapter in his life, I say to myself, what if he had only said Yes to Jesus Christ, the difference it would have made.

For then I also read in that chapter that close by was that group of disciples who overheard everything that was going on. And as you know, one of the disciples was always quick to speak up -- you're right, it's Peter! And Peter had heard this thing that was going on between Jesus and the young man and it occurred to him that just Jesus was saying to him they had already denied! So he says to Jesus, "We've given up everything to follow you -- "

...and then if you read between the lines, honestly now, you

Bible Study 111 11

get Peter saying, "So what? Where has it paid off for us?
What are we going to get out of it? We've done the very
thing that you're telling this young fellow that he ought
to do!" . . .

So as I read this part of the episode, I say, what a pity! Because in reality they both belong in the "What if -- ?" chapters stage. What if -- the young ruler had done as Jesus commanded.....and what if -- those who had already done as He commanded were fully appreciating the benefits that were meant to be theirs? Peter and his company had already done this thing and they simply weren't cashing in on the dividends.

And I'm standing here right now to tell you that I have reason to believe that that's the trouble with a good many of us. We already have what we ought to have, but we lack an appreciation for it. We're not making the most of the dividends that are being returned in our name. We're insensitive to this.

We had a delightful evening on Friday. We went with the Wifaul group for the first time. I heard about their activities, the schedule for Friday night was to go out somewhere for dinner. And to get there we went in the Saint Luke bus. It was about 45 miles away where dinner was to be served...

...and Mary Lambacher and Julie Ekland did a magnificent thing as we were traveling along to occupy our time. They engaged us in a scavenger hunt as we remained in our seats in the bus....

Now I'll have to explain that to you. We got a sheet of paper listing 41 different things that could be found in a woman's pocketbook. You didn't hear me wrong -- 41 things that could be found in a woman's handbag or pocketbook. Well, we were to check them off. And one of the things was: a key that doesn't belong to anything in particular. And would you believe me if I were to tell you that Winifred had it!

And that brought fresh to my mind what I heard a preacher say in a sermon

once. He had gone to an auction. He thoroughly enjoyed going to auctions. And as you might expect, he bought some things that he really didn't need, and one was a chest of drawers. And lo and behold, after he had made the purchase, a man came up to him and offered him, right there on the spot, half-again as much as he had paid for it.....

...the preacher thought to himself, well if it's worth that much to him, it's worth that much to me, and he refused to sell it. When the auction was over it occurred to the preacher that it might be easier for him to transport the chest of drawers home if he emptied the drawers -- there was still a collection of things in the drawers, the chest was being sold as it was.

...he got a cardboard box, and then emptied a lot of insignificant things -- you might brand it as trash -- into the cardboard box. And one of the things that went into the cardboard box was an old key. As he was about to leave, a man came up to him and offered him twice as much as he paid for the chest for the cardboard box, and only the cardboard box and its contents.....and there again the preacher reasoned within himself, if it's worth that much to him, it's worth that much to me, although he had no use for it, and he took it home and he stored it in his basement. And every now and then he'd look at it.

...and then one day his son came home from college, and whatever took him to the basement I can't tell you, but he found the cardboard box. And of all the items in the box the one that took his eye was the key. And he brought it to his father in the study, and he asked if he could have it. And his father said, "Why not? What good is a key on which there isn't anything that it can unlock?" The son was sole to tell his father that it was a prize key, that it was a rare item

And that has led me to muse now, in your presence, how often you and I have the key to something and we fail to recognize its value. The disciples had made their commitment to Jesus Christ, and one of their number, Peter, speaks up and says, "We've left all to follow you -- so what!" And they had in their possession the key to all that Jesus Christ can offer a man, and they were failing to recognize it and to call it by its rightful name.

This is the sad situation in which any number of Christians that I know may find themselves. They were no different, you see, from the young ruler. They were still lacking something. While the young ruler was still to make a commitment, they had already made the commitment, but they were not pushing in on all that it had to offer. Jesus Christ gives us the key -- to new life -- a life in which we're made free from the sins that we've committed. We talk about the keys of the Kingdom -- it's in and through the Church, you see, that we're being reminded constantly of God's redeeming love, that we're being unlocked from the dungeon of guilt, and torment, and being made free to be the sons of light. God gives us that!

My heart goes out to the Roman Catholic Church these days, honestly it does. I read a number of their journals and I discover that confession is down -- they don't have nearly as many people coming to confession as once they did. I'm a firm believer in confession, public or private, I don't care which. But I think a man needs to call his sins by name, a man needs to know that he's being forgiven.

The other side of the coin is this: confessions are down, but the psychiatrists are making a killing. Folks may not go to the confessional booth, but they discover the need to go to someone. Within the Christian Church, for those who are followers of Jesus Christ, again and repeatedly we hear Jesus saying, "I love you . . . I forgive you . . . you don't have to be tormented . . . you can be forgiven." That's one reason why some of us keep coming back here Sunday

"THREE-OF-A-KIND"
(II Timothy 1:5)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

I have his photograph to this day in my study, which is close by this pulpit here in Saint Luke Church. I have his photograph there for several reasons. Let me give you what those reasons are right now.

When I began my ministry I was young and inexperienced, and he was wise and he was mature. He was, I dare say, almost three times my age. He came to church every Sunday. With respect, he, the old man, called me, the young one, "Pastor." It was a pronounced measure of encouragement. I came to love him dearly, and all that he represented. And that is one reason why I have his photograph in my study to this very day, because when I looked at him he reminds me that it is possible in this world to live the Christian life. For he did it so beautifully and so magnificently. God smiled upon him with long years....he lived to be almost a hundred.

One day when I was looking at him, and his daughter was close by -- I didn't mean to embarrass him, but unashamedly I found myself asking the question as I said to his daughter Harriet, "How do you get a man like your father?" -- he who represented so much Christian integrity, a good and faithful servant throughout all the years. She answered immediately, "Well, his mother -- my grandmother -- she was a wonderful woman." Well, there is your answer. They just don't happen. They become what they are. And when you look at one, invariably you see one or two others.

And that's why my sermon today, on this festival that marks the Christian Home, bears the title "THREE-OF-A-KIND." And you know immediately why the

sermon gets the title as I read the text for you now. The Apostle Paul is writing a letter to a young man by the name of Timothy. And he says, in that second letter that he wrote to Timothy, the first chapter, the fifth verse:

"I am reminded of your sincere faith,
a faith that dwelt first in your
grandmother Lois, and then in your
mother Eunice. I am sure it dwells
in you . . ."

....three-of-a-kind. But you don't get the third one without the second, and you would never have gotten the second one without the first one.

The Apostle Paul, you know, had been hoping he could find somebody who could help carry on his work. He had this great passion for extending the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, and he had reached the age in life where I presume he was thanking God, if only he could find someone who represented so well what it means to be a Christian. And then in God's plan for his life, and Timothy's as well, their paths cross. And Paul must have been deeply gratified in the realization that he had found Timothy.

And so as he was looking at Timothy he was impressed by all that he was. And then as though he was reasoning with himself, he said, "But Timothy, I can't give you the credit for it. You are what you are because you've had the mother that you've had, and she had the mother that she had. When I look at you and think of your faith, I think immediately of two other people."

Would you believe it that I have been with you long enough now, for two decades, that as I look at any number of you I see three people at one time! I see you, I see your mother, and I see your grandmother. And I, too, say to myself, you're three-of-a-kind. And we couldn't have the one without the second, and we couldn't have the second without the third. That's the way it is. And it's been that way from the very, very beginning. That's the

after Sunday.

It was the key that Jesus Christ had given them, to a life of joy -- "I am come that you may have life and that you may have it more abundantly, and that your joy may be full . . . " This is what Jesus Christ says to us. This is why I take myself to task and why I take some of you to task when I find you carrying the burden of the world upon your shoulders. Who am I to see?

You remember the article that I once wrote about WORRY? It's the one thing that doesn't become the face of a Christian, and it's the last thing that ought ever to happen, is to die with a worried look upon his face. This I most certainly believe. It's Jesus Christ who said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light" -- in comparison to the burden of the world. He chose wisely who chose the words to be carved into the stone over the Red Doors that lead as the entrance into this place:

"MY PEACE I GIVE UNTO YOU"

....this is what Jesus Christ is saying to the disciples -- "I give it to you -- I offer it to you -- it's already yours -- now." There it is.

What if - - - I say to you - - you were to take Him seriously, to believe it, to cash in on the dividends -- today -- now.

Where did I read it....about some chap who went down into the mountains of Tennessee, or West Virginia, and he saw an old codger hermit seated on his porch ...and he looked about and saw all the things he didn't have, and he said, "You ought to get up from your rocker -- you ought to identify with society -- you ought to become productive! Then think of all the things you could have! And then one day you could sit down and you could relax and you could retire and you could enjoy life!" And the old codger said, "And what do you think I am doing now?"

....and in that spirit I say to you, think of all the things in the name of Jesus Christ upon which we ought to be able to draw - - - now!

way you get a Christian. That's the way you get a good Christian. They grow....they develop, because somebody nurtured them. They just don't happen.

I know what you're saying, and I know what you're thinking -- "Not always, Pastor, not always." And you're absolutely right! Don't I spend any number of hours with some of you in the course of the day when you seek the path that leads to my study, just because you lament the fact that it hasn't worked out the way you had hoped and prayed that it would, and you're getting a very meek and ugly return on the investment that you've made. Of course it doesn't always work out that way! But I know one thing: a Lois, and a Eunice, and a Timothy -- you get three-of-a-kind more often than not! And that's the thing that keeps us going. We've got to remember that more often than not, that's the way you get a Timothy. You can't have him, generally speaking, without a Lois, without a Eunice, without a mother, without a grandmother.

I wish I could tell you that parents could bat 100% every time, but they don't. And one reason may be that they have to deal with the kind of material that we put in their hands. We need to remember that, too.

Well, let me tell you a little bit about the mother of Timothy, because that's what brought so great joy to the Apostle Paul when he looked at him: "Timothy, I can't give you the credit for it just by yourself. I've got to give your mother credit, and your grandmother."

Well I don't know too much about his grandmother. I know his grandmother by her daughter, Timothy's mother. Now what can I tell you about Timothy's mother? Well, I'm sorry to have to tell you this: she didn't marry a Christian. She was the only believer in the family, as far as the parents were concerned. How that happened I don't know, but it's a matter of record as far as the Bible is concerned, that she was married to an unbeliever. And that meant

that, very largely then, that she had to bring up Timothy on her own, singlehandedly. She was the one person most responsible for his spiritual nurture.....

....and I am sorry to have to tell you that that's the way it is every now and then among you. Now I wish it were different! Now I wish that you could be mated in a way that's compatible spiritually, and that together both the father and the mother would provide the necessary spiritual nurture for the child. But it doesn't always happen that way.

And when it doesn't happen, then God doesn't excuse the person who happens to be a Christian. God still says, "I expect you to fulfill your obligation in my name, and I'll help you to do it." Every now and then I fall on my knees and I thank God for the way that some of you single-handedly are fulfilling your obligation in the name of Jesus Christ.

The second thing that I can tell you about Timothy's mother is this: that she began to do it when he was very young. The Scriptures say that as a baby she began to teach him. Well, that is when you begin. I'm always sorry for people who put it off. I'm appalled sometimes to discover how many people there are in this, our day, who foolishly allow themselves to believe that religion is such a personal matter that they'll wait until a child is old enough to decide for himself. God pity us when we apply even such a yardstick to morality and to ethics in general -- wait until the child is old enough to know for himself. Too much damage can be done in the meantime, and perhaps irreparable damage.

I sit back sometimes and ask myself the question, suppose you were not related to the church as you are? What about the church would command your respect? I'm about to tell you this: if I were drawn to the church if for no other reason because of my faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, I'd be drawn because of the high value which the church places upon the soul of

a child. The Church is always focusing its attention upon a child. That's why I am so happy that I belong to a tradition that emphasises infant baptism, that as soon after birth as possible you bring your child to the church that the child might be named for Jesus Christ, that the sign and seal of God's favor might be established, and that you might know it.

It's become traditional here in Saint Luke now, it will happen after this service this morning, when a baptism will take place....the Pastor receives the child from the arms of the mother, and baptizes the child, and then when he returns the child after a prayer, he says to the parents: -- some of you will recognize these words -- "God smiles upon us in many ways, perhaps never more so than when He places into our life and into our love the soul of a child; and as long as we live we have no greater responsibility."

Timothy's mother, God be praised, recognized that and from the very beginning she began to exercise that responsibility in behalf of her child. From the time he was a baby she nurtured him in the Christian faith.

I once had a friend she said to me, "Pastor, for God's sake, pay attention to them while they're young. You can't do for a kid eighteen what you should have done for him when he was eight." And he's absolutely right.

That truth was indelibly impressed upon the fabric of my mind not so long ago when one of our parishioners very thoughtfully provided us with a sum of money for a tree to be planted on the parsonage grounds. She herself chose the tree, a cedar of Lebanon. You know why we'd cherish it. The tree was planted. I didn't pay too much attention to it, but Winifred, who grew up close to the soil, was fully aware of what was happening. And she said to me, you'd better get that tree staked. You'd better put some guide-wires on that tree, because one day it's going to be too late....so we gave the word, and the work was done.

...we can't do it, but I wish we could all walk

over to the parsonage grounds after the service and I'd show you that tree, a thing of beauty to behold. But it might not have been that way had it not been made straight when it was young, and direction given to it. Christians just don't happen. You grow them. You train them. You direct them.

That's why I'm pleased to be associated with Saint Luke Church. It has a concern for people of all ages and does not neglect in its concern for people of all ages the regard that it ought to give to those who are young, in their impressionable years. That's why we make much here in Saint Luke Church of Youth Ministry. That's why we make much of Christian Education. That's why we say we have a choir program for people of all ages, and particularly those who are young and in the teenage period of their lives. We need them. Scripture makes it as a matter of record that Timothy's mother began to teach him while he was young, even though she had to teach him very much by herself.

John Wesley, you know, and Charles -- how many sons did their mother have? Suzanne had, what -- 12 - 13 children? -- one of her biographers said of her, she made it a point to spend at least an hour a day with several of the children at one time so that in the course of the day they all got some measure of undivided attention, because, she said to herself, I will do for my children what needs to be done, and I will not wait for somebody else to do it. No wonder you got a John Wesley....and no wonder you got a Charles Wesley.

I smiled inwardly, of course I did, and you would too, when I read the article some time ago about a man who was surveying the contemporary scene, and he said what this world needs more than anything else is a new kind of parent.....and then he went on to describe the new kind of parent. And this is where I began to smile broadly, because I was old enough to know that this new kind of parent that he was describing was the old-fashioned kind

of parent that we in the Christian Church have been talking about for a long, long time! You begin while they're young. You make the investment then.

When I graduated from college I had the good fortune to take a trip out west. We spent two-and-a-half months traveling by auto. The Dean of the college with whom I went wanted to visit kinfolk of his that came out of central Pennsylvania and had re-established in Kansas. And in Hiawatha, Kansas, when we had breakfast in the home of Jacob Straib, a God-fearing man if ever I met a God-fearing man, the table was spread in good Pennsylvania German fashion, a hearty breakfast if ever there was to be a hearty breakfast... ..but before we touched a morsel, old Jacob Straib read a good long chapter in the Bible, then we got down on our knees and knelt alongside of the chair and he had a long and earnest prayer....

...we visited his sons and his daughters, in Salem, Oregon, and we had breakfast in their home, and the same pattern prevailed.....

...we visited his daughter in Seattle, Washington, and we had a meal in her home, and the same pattern prevailed.....

I'm inclined to believe that any investment that we make is never completely lost. Any investment made by a parent never goes down the drain completely. We may think so at times, but nothing ever motivated, done in God's name, is ever completely lost. Timothy's mother believed that. She lived by it. And that's one reason why you got a Timothy.

Let me tell you this. Joseph Forta Newton used to tell the story that came out of the history of Tennessee. The frontiersmen had established a post, only for a little while until the attacking Indians came and destroyed it. They killed off most of the people. A few women escaped, and they took some young boys as prisoners. The years passed. The territory was reclaimed

by the white man. The Indian was conquered. The commanding officer found among the warriors that he took captive some fair-skinned Indians. He could hardly believe it. And then he was given to understand what had happened in that territory years before, and he found two mothers who remembered the loss of their boys. He wondered, of course, could these be the boys that were taken captive, and the Indians made warriors out of them, and their fair skin betrayed them? So he asked the two mothers to come and see if they could establish some measure of identification....and up and down the line they went, hopefully looking, but only getting a blank stare from the eyes of the Indian warriors, fair-skinned ones as well.

Then the commanding officer said, "Why don't you try this: surely you must have sung a lullaby to your boys when they were young. Go up and down that line, and sing the lullaby that you sang when you put your children to bed." The mother did that, and when she came to one, he fell out of line and embraced her, tears coming down his cheeks, and finished singing the lullaby himself.

Again and ever so often, I suggest to you, a redeeming quality in this life is to sing anew the song that was taught in the days of childhood. Nothing remains more precious than what we learned at a mother's knee, still in God's plan -- He has no substitute for it. This I most certainly believe.

But now I should also tell you this. Pastor David and I were once asked by a parishioner to visit in the home of a neighbor whose days were numbered -- inoperable cancer. In fact the day when Pastor David and I went to see him he looked as though death would come before we would leave. It's not a very easy thing to make a call upon one in that situation, who is a total stranger to you. And yet you feel you have to touch base somewhere in the name of Jesus Christ, and you try looking for a handle.....

....well, somewhere in the conversation we introduced the

subject of prayer, and I was bold enough to say, "Have you ever prayed?"

...and with whatever strength he could command,

"Mam, have I ever prayed!"...spoken in faltering tongue....

"I've prayed in almost every major port of the world."

...he had been an old seaman.

Then I said, "What did you pray?" -- thinking perhaps he'd say to me he prayed for strength, he prayed for protection. But this is what he said when I asked him, "What did you pray?"

"Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep"

....the only prayer he knew. But a prayer of complete trust and dependency upon God. And if that's the only thing a mother could ever give a child, she couldn't have given him anything better.

I was tempted to come to this sacred desk this morning to preach an old-fashioned sermon about motherhood. And most of that sermon would have been a tribute to my mother, because I remember the day we buried her....and when I walked away from the grave, as I told some of you, the impact was made upon my soul that there was the one person, more than any other person on the face of this earth, who had introduced me to the fact of God.....

....and if as a minister of the Gospel I have
any value to you today, you won't forget to thank her,
will you?

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"COMMON COMMITMENT"
(Mark 6:7)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

It could well be that the conversation at the village well in Nazareth went something like this one day: "Mary, tell us about your children." And then she began naming them one by one -- there may have been five, six, seven, I don't know -- but surely more than one. And after she talked about each one of them, presumably she might have said, "And then there is . . . Jesus.".....as much to imply by the tone of her voice that He was different. And He was.

He was a loner. That's right, He was a loner. Of all her children, may I suggest to you that He was the last one to come in for the supper call. With whatever gift of imagination that God gives you, why don't you think of it this way.....

....the others were there. Then came in Jesus.

Presumably Mary said to Him: "Where were you?"

and He said, "Up there -- you know where."

....and of course she knew where -- yonder hill,
the outskirts of Nazareth.

She really didn't have to ask the other question,
but she did: "Were you alone?"

"Yes, Mother."

"What were you doing, Jesus?"

"Just thinking."

....undoubtedly that's the kind of answer that she got when Jesus came in...

.....alone.

He was a loner. He could afford to be a loner because He had so much going for Him from the very beginning. Even before He became a teenager He exercised a measure of independence, when with His family He went up to Jerusalem to the great feast. His cousins, how they delighted in running here and there, seeing the big sights in the big city! Not so Jesus. He was a loner. He was off to the temple, all by Himself, sitting with the learned ones, listening to them and asking them questions, and holding His own magnificently. He was a loner.

One day, in God's plan for His life, He left Nazareth, turned His back on the carpenter shop, went out and got a good look at the world. Up and down He went throughout Galilee and Judea. He saw it first-hand. He saw a great deal, yes He did. He saw it through the eyes of God. His heart was pained when He saw the misery of men.

He came back one day to Nazareth and He went, as His custom was, to the synagogue....and He remembered. They invited Him to read from the sacred writings, and so He did. And when He was finished somebody suggested that He might say something. Which He did. He made a tremendous comment on the Scripture that He had read. It was a passage from the Old Testament, of course, from the Book of Isaiah, that said something about the sick, the imprisoned -- all the needy of the world that could be ministered to -- how the gospel ought to be proclaimed. He was a loner, because right then and there He said, without looking anywhere for support, without reading a resolution that had been drafted by some committee....He stood there all by Himself and said: "Today this scripture is going to be fulfilled in your ears."

...He acted independently. He saw that something had to be done, and He was willing to do something about it then and there. It had to be done only by Himself, and by Himself alone.

....so He established the base for the Kingdom, by Himself.

But the time came when the base had to be broadened. And wisely He had gathered Himself a company of disciples. The day came when He was going to send them out to do the very same kind of thing that He had been doing all by Himself. And that leads me now to the text for today's sermon, the 7th verse of the 6th chapter of the Gospel according to Mark, which reads in this manner:

"And Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two."

The emphasis is properly given. He was a loner. He could afford to be.

He had a lot going for Him from the very beginning. And then there was that time in His life when the heavens were parted and a voice was heard to say, as the Divine Imprimatur was placed:

"This is my beloved Son - listen to Him."

When He came to send out the twelve, He did not send them out one by one. Then He sent out two-by-two. Knowing human nature as He did, He knew full well that no man was meant to go through life by Himself. One of the very precious things that you and I can understand about God is that He always has this concern for us, and He's always handing down the prescription even before we ask for it. He made us to reach out to somebody else, and He's always raising up someone to whom we can be paired.

Did it ever occur to you as you read the listing of the twelve disciples, that like as not they're listed in pairs? Listen as I read the list the way Matthew recorded it: Simon-and-Andrew his brother.....James-and-John....
...Philip-and-Bartolomew.....Thomas-and-Matthew.....James-and-Thaddaeus...
....Simon the Canananean-and-Judas Iscariot - - - linked together.

You can't even read the pages of the Bible, Old or New, without discovering that every now and then God sent down people in pairs. He linked them,

one to another: ...you can't think of Moses without thinking of Aaron...

...you can't think of Joshua without thinking of Caleb...

...you can't think of David without thinking of Jonathan...

...you can't think of Paul without thinking of Silas....

Would you be willing to have me suggest to you that when God saw fit to give Mary that most precious of all assignments, He related her to Elizabeth during her pregnancy period. God in His wisdom sees fit to link people together. Not one by one does He send them out to face problems of life, but two-by-two.

You know the reason why, of course you do. As we're linked together, in God's plan for your life or my life, He raises up someone who more than any other person becomes a kindred spirit....

-- it may go beyond marriage

-- it may be a person of a different sex

-- it may be within your own family...it may be outside your

family

-- it may be somebody your own age...it may be somebody

younger....it may be somebody older.....

God in His wisdom has to make you that there is always someone who constitutes himself or herself in a kindred spirit. It's one of the wonders of life! And it happens. And it makes life worth living!

Some of us wouldn't want to live another day if we couldn't believe that somewhere in this wicked world there's at least one person, who perhaps more so than any other, understands us as no one else understands us, to whom we can lay bare our soul and talk about our dreams...to whom we can express our weaker side. God made us that way, and God is always raising up someone with whom we can be linked and paired off.

It serves its purpose, and serves its purpose exceedingly well. As an

example, because we are as we are, occasionally we need somebody to challenge us, to appeal to our better side -- you and I do have a better side, you know -- and every now and then you and I become better than what we have been just because somebody appealed to us, made us dissatisfied with the kind of person we have been. One of the sad things about human nature is that there's always the tendency on the part of most of us to level off below the standard of performance that God made us capable of achieving. There is always this tendency to level downward. And then every now and then God raises somebody, puts that person into our life, and because of that person we want to become better than we are just because that person appeals to our better side. If some of us reveal any measure of goodness it's just because God gave us someone challenging us to become better than we are.

It happens at different times in our lives, and sometimes with different people. I remember how in God's plan for my life He paired me with Oscar William Carlson, that grand and good man-of-the-cloth, pastor in Baltimore, and off we went to India for that special assignment back in '63 and '64, that winter. And every now and then, as he and I would share the assignment, I found myself wanting to become far better than I was. You couldn't be in his presence without wanting to stand a bit more erect, to dream nobler dreams. He's the author of the statement that I've filed away called "HAGGIFICE"....and in the series of sentences that he wrote he talked about the possibility of a person achieving a measure of greatness. God didn't make us to be paltry....God didn't make us to deal with trivia. God made us to reach for the stars, to dream great dreams, and to achieve, within our limitations, something that otherwise we might not know -- only because somebody challenged us and dared us to be better than we have been. That's why God pairs us, because in His plan for your life there is somebody

who could serve that purpose, if you let that person serve that purpose.

God also sends them out two-by-two because every now and then we need to be rebuked. Sometimes only a friend can tell us off and get away with it. Yet, for shame upon some of us, we put our friends, our truest friends, in a very difficult situation, because we may lead them to believe that an alienating factor could be introduced if they really told us off. In one of those grand and good sessions that we have at Bethany, this past week when a group of women were there for a day-time retreat, we were talking about the gift of speech, and how God puts us sometimes in a certain situation where we need to speak the right word at the right time. And then one person admitted that frequently there was a reluctance on her part to speak the word of truth, lest her friend not appreciate it and something in turn would happen to their friendship. For shame upon all of us to allow people to think that the only thing we want to hear from them are the words that please us! There are times when we need to grow. And we grow by being rebuked. Getting compliments all the time can be a very deadly thing to a person. To be able to speak the word of truth, even in a measure of rebuke, is a very necessary thing. So God sends them out two-by-two. And who knows a person better than a friend? It's been said a friend is your other self, an alter ego.

And then, of course, there come times when a friend, the person with whom God pains you off in life as a kindred spirit, the person in the world, the one person who gives you a measure of comfort and encouragement -- God knew what kind of problems these disciples would have to face when they went out, and how weary they would become and how frequently they would say, what's the use? -- and then their spirits had to be buoyed up by somebody else. And that's why they did it.

I'm having an exceedingly precious time on Friday nights at Bethany, our

retreat house, with graduating high school seniors. Last Friday night when a small company was gathered there -- we have been limiting them to small groups -- I gave them to understand that within the next ten years, they will have reached the age of twenty-eight -- in all likelihood every one of them will be married, and they could have a child or two....which gave me a chance to zero in on that very important thought: what kind of a man are you looking for? (they were all girls who were present)

-- what is the kind of person that you would like to
have claim your life?

Would you believe me that the one thought that kept bobbing back and forth on the horizon in our conversation -- somebody who understands me, somebody to whom I can go when I need to talk.

I'm always troubled, you see, when some of you come for counseling, and you say, "Our communication has broken down." When people are sent out into this world two-by-two, that's one of the purposes that it serves, even as communication is identification.

There is one other thought that I'd share with you. When God sends us into this world two-by-two and pairs us off, like as not it's with one who is always going to be a reminder of the person we could become. That was alluded to earlier. I told you about old Quinton Hoag. He was the man who went to work in the slums of London. He was God's agent of redemption. One day there was a man who was singled out for his strength of character. Somebody said, "How can you remain so strong in the face of the temptations that we know come your way?" He reached into his wallet and pulled out a soiled and torn photograph of a man. He said, "That's old Quinton Hoag -- he redeemed me from the slums, Quinton Hoag did -- and every time I'm tempted to go astray I take out this picture and look at it. God gave me that man to hold on to." You know, of course you do, and I know, that the

only tried and trusted and true friend that any of us has is Jesus Christ, the one above all others who well deserves the name of friend, but human as we are, in this world every now and then we need one person as we don't need any other person, to hold on to, lest we go off the deep end.

This sermon is being preached for a two-fold reason: your situation is never hopeless as long as you recognize the fact that God has placed in this world one person to touch your life for good as no other person can -- honestly now. That's a fact. There is such a person in your life. Give thanks to God.

The other side of the coin is this: God intends that you also be that kind of person. And there could be in this world one person for whom you have a measure of responsibility, in the sight of God, as no other person has that responsibility. Don't fail God, or that person. . . .

. . . He sent them out, not one by one, but two-by-two.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"ALL THINGS GOOD AND HOLY"
(Romans 2:4)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Shakespeare, in one of his plays, has one of his characters, after she has had a very difficult time, heading toward home under the cover of the darkness of night. And as she approaches the place where she's accustomed to living, she finds a single candle burning in the window. To her friend who accompanies her she exclaims, "So shines a good deed in a naughty world!" And of course she was right.

In a world that seems to be moving faster than we can handle, in a world that I sometimes think is moving faster toward Hell than Heaven, it is easy to believe or to think that darkness is settling in upon us rather permanently -- the acts of violence that we hear, or that we see, according to the reports that come to us, are enough to make any of us turn sour on life. Man's inhumanity to man, we say, numbs every single one of us. But, what a difference a single act of kindness can make. It brightens up the whole corner of life where and when it happens.

In company with Portia, who was surprised and pleased with a good deed in a naughty world, most of us have our all-too-frequent moments when we think the good deed is the exception, that the world by and large is a very naughty place in which to live. So let me at once in this place at this time ask you a very fundamental question: What is your basic view regarding life? Come now, is it good? -- or is it bad? Will good eventually triumph? Do you honestly believe it -- or is it just a measure of wishful thinking on your part -- something to which you subscribe which all too easily disappears when the ugly and the

untoward take its toll of you?

....or have you subscribed to the notion that maybe
when it's all said and done the world is evil, and good
is the illusion . . . ?

A man orders his days, he orders his years, according to his basic philosophy of life.

I know full well that when I stand among you, what you really have committed yourselves to, we're the followers of One who went about doing good while He was here on this earth. We have not found ourselves within the gathered company of the believers of Satanic influence. We are the children of God. We are the children of light, and not the children of darkness.

Asked another preacher of his people one day: "Is life essentially evil though crossed here and there with good, or essentially good though marred at many points by evil? To ask it differently, which is exceptional in the world: good or evil? A British limerick gives the situation as most men see it:

'God's plan made a hopeful beginning
But man spoiled his chances by sinning.
We trust that the story
Will end in God's glory
But at the present the other side's winning' . . . "

It's not my purpose to come here to the sacred desk this morning to carry on a running commentary about the presence of evil in this world. I am realist enough to know that life has a number of sufficient untoward and ugly events happening all the time, with marked regularity, to make any of us when his guard could be down into a cynic. Yet it is a matter of record that when Jesus was here on earth He lived out the days of His years against a world that was ugly, even more so than ours. But there was a man one time who set

down his basic concept of Jesus Christ. It's a matter of record in one of the Gospels, that when he thought of the day in which Jesus lived and when he thought about Jesus Christ, he simply had to say: "Here was a man who went about doing good."

Did it ever occur to you that in our time of personal or national crisis, for whom do we look most? -- someone who represents a measure of integrity, someone who personifies goodness. That's the one toward whom we'll gravitateas though that were God's perfect answer to us -- and is!

Surely you know I have my moments when I suffer a measure of despair. And then I remember the way Ernest Hemingway put it -- he had a way with words -- he referred to the 'scattered magnificence of the world'. He was right. For all the evidence of evil stacked up here and there in this place and that, the undeniable token of all that is good and holy raises its head triumphantly. This you and I must forever remember. Why are we drawn to Jesus Christ the way we are drawn? -- because in this darkened world His was the lighted candle -- -- call it by any name you choose -- --

...a candle called Love

...a candle called Truth

...it all comes out in the same way: a candle called God. And that candle was burning in our midst, a light that became a glow that no evil can put out.

They tried it. That's the meaning of Calvary -- evil having a moment of ascendancy. But it couldn't last. Evil can never permanently extinguish Truth and Goodness. Again and ever so often Evil tries it, but I say to you with all the strength that I can command, WILL, no matter how strong it may be, always comes out second. In the battle with God, Goodness always gets first place.

There's a text for today's sermon. It will strike you a bit odd, really now -- but let me tell you a little bit about how the text happened to be written. It was written by a man who saw a great deal of life....he wandered around from place to place and was forever putting his finger upon the pulse-beat of people. His occupation was a tent-mender. But as he was mending his tents he would think about people with whom he had come into a relationship, and he would think about the way God had come into his life and touched him for good. One day he sat down to write a letter to a group of people who were Christians who lived in the imperial and wicked city of Rome. And in that second chapter of the letter that he wrote you'll find the 4th verse that reads something like this:

"Don't you know that it's the goodness of
God that leads a man to repentance."

Now that's an interesting way of saying this to people. Usually you and I talk about the wrath of God that makes a man want to be good. Usually you and I think in terms of punishment and threat, and 'the devil's going to get you if you don't mend your ways.' But bless the Apostle Paul's soul, he says,

"Look around about you -- see the evidence of God's
goodness. Look longingly into the very face of God himself . . ."
...and see if that doesn't make you want to become a good person. And if you're
already a good person, a better person.

Tell me honestly, wherein is your motivation in trying to get people to be better than what they are? I have to ask myself this question. You know again and over so often when I come to this sacred desk I allow myself to be transparent in your midst. I speak very freely and frankly with you for all these years that God has given me of being a pastor. I've also had the responsibility of being an administrator, and that means bringing to the at-

tention of people certain things that need to be done, trying to get them to understand that we're workers together, we have a job that needs consideration.....

...now some people get others to do a job by coercing

...some people get others to do a job by cajoling

...some people get others to do a job by holding over

them a threat of dismissal.....

Perhaps there have been times when I look back across the years when I should have come down heavier than I did. But my basic concept has always been that any man who is privileged to work in the Kingdom of the Lord should have reason enough to want to do a good piece of work. The very goodness of God inspires us, the very love of God is enough to make goodness attractive, to make us want to become better than we are.

Would you permit me to say it -- I have always believed that to be God's #1 card in His hand? We have our moments when we can think of God as the great gambler who is always taking a risk with us. And like as not, the card that He prefers to use in His hand is always that of love.

I subscribe to the basic notion that by and large, down deep inside every one of us there is the possibility that we can respond to the goodness. Man is made sensitive to memory....man is so made that he can be conscience-stricken. Man is so made that goodness inevitably has its appeal.

I find myself with our Service Book and Hymnal in my hand occasionally, drawn instinctively to this page and to that page. There is one hymn among many that remains a favorite of mine. It deals with my relationship to Jesus Christ. I'll read you now some of its lines:

"How can I choose but love Thee, God's dear Son,
O Jesus, loveliest and most loving one!
Were there no heaven to gain, no hell to flee,
For what thou art alone I must love thee."

When God saw fit to try to win the world to His side, what did He do? He let

loose in this world a Man who went about doing good, who introduced a broad new dimension to love, which is the very goodness of God.

You know, of course you do, that the very name of God comes from the Anglo-Saxon which means good... ..as the heart of the universe goodness remains. And that's why some of us believe that it's possible here on earth for us to reflect a measure of that goodness, and to introduce the heavenly dimension now.

I once heard it said that Thomas Carlyle struggled with his beliefs, and one time he took a friend to hear a man who was advertised as a lecturer, and his lecture would deal with the theme of "God." Carlyle and his friend went because they were told he was going to establish a case against God -- he was an avowed atheist. He was a very clever chap, and a very learned fellow. And he thought he could present a case all signed and sealed and delivered that would nullify the fact of God....

....Carlyle and his friend sat, somewhat spell-bound by the man who held them in the palm of his hand while he built a case against God. And as he neared the conclusion, Carlyle's friend is supposed to have said, "Well that does God in now! That settles the case!" Carlyle said, "Oh no, it doesn't! Not for me! He still has to deal with the fact of my mother. For the one point that you can't argue when it comes to the existence of God -- you can't deny the fact of God when you think of the goodness as personified by one person."

Would you believe me if I were to tell you that as I live out the days of my years, I find myself inadvertently thinking simultaneously of God and certain people. They are the irrefutable proof of the goodness of God. In company with any number of people I look back at this time of the year to the schools that I attended, from which I graduated, a campus here and a campus there where I

lived, and always there looms upon the horizon one professor in particular, isn't that right?

In these delightful sessions that I have with graduating seniors at Bethany on Friday nights I ask them occasionally: "Tell me about the teachers who meant most to you." And I always get an answer. There's always one who seems to stand above the others, and always it's one who left a marked influence for good -- and graciously so, upon the life of the pupil.

Among all that I had at Seminary, there was one who was in a class all by himself: Harvey Daniel Hoover, whose granddaughter, by the way, at one time was a member of this congregation. He told us how when he was young in the ministry he spent a little time in Chicago. Somebody came and said, "Would you conduct a funeral service for this person who died?" Human nature being as it is, the person was quick to tell him that she was a woman of ill repute, who hadn't lived a very salutary life...well, what could you expect in the slums of Chicago?

...But Dr. Hoover said he would conduct the funeral service for the woman. And then being young in years, he had to decide for himself -- in the sermon that he would preach at that funeral service, he was tempted to talk about the wrath of God...the wages of sin...to ring the changes and to come down heavily. And then he caught himself short and said to himself, Why, they know all about sin! They know what Hell is like! They live in it every day. They know what sin is like -- it killed her. So he said to himself, I will not talk about the wrath of God.....I'll talk about the love of God.

Surely the smile of favor must have come from Heaven above, and particularly from the Apostle Paul, who said something in this text for today's sermon -- "And don't you know this -- it's the goodness of God that's meant to make us better than we are." And to prove the point: Christ was willing to die -- for us! And you don't get a better dose of goodness than that. And that's worth remembering. That's why some of us are ashamed of the fact that we're not better than we are.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"MISSION ACCOMPLISHED"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

When something can be captured and reflected as magnificently and as majestically as that, as the singing of the hymn with which we've just dealt, surely the event itself ought not to be forgotten. It's in that manner and in that mood that I come to this sacred desk on this, the Sunday after the Ascension of our Blessed Lord.

Surely the Ascension doesn't have nearly the appeal of Christmas, surely not the appeal of Easter. But for shame upon us if we should ever allow it to become a forgotten day in the calendar of the Church.

Let me immediately remind you what Ascension represents. It represents above all else achievement and victory. The assignment given to our Blessed Lord had been accomplished. He did all that the Father had required of Him. He did it victoriously. Now having lived His messianic years upon earth, He returned to Heaven -- as Victor -- mission accomplished, triumphantly so.

In keeping with you I sit back every now and then and think about what could be referred to as "Great Moments" in one's life. I remember when I first went to the Holy Land and stood one night on the Mount of the Ascension. I did exactly what you would have done, I tried to identify with what took place there. I tried to think of how Jesus Christ, having spent three years, then appeared there for the last time to His disciples and friends, and as He returned to Heaven He gave them a parting command, and He said -- "Now, you go -- you preach, you teach, you make disciples, you baptize...ye. be my witnesses."

I also remember that having done that having done that, and after He disappeared from their sight, they stood there, and God's representatives, the angels, came and said, "Why do you stand there? Why do you gaze idly up into Heaven?" . . . a free translation of all that followed could be: "Get with it now! You heard what He said - - go about His work!"

Has it ever occurred to you that a good and proper understanding of the Christian Church could be that it is the extension of the ministry of Christ on earth. Everything that Jesus Christ did while He was here on earth He expects us to go on doing. He gave us that responsibility. And in order to see it accomplished, He gave us the promise of the Holy Spirit by which we would be enabled to do what He said we ought to do.

I have my moments likewise when I sit back and I say to myself, what if Jesus Christ should suddenly re-appear before I expected Him to come, and He would say to me, "How is it going? What progress have you made? You know what I expect from you and fellow disciples - - how is it going?"

I have an answer for Him. You're entitled to know what it is:

"Not very well, Lord and Master, not very well. It's a mighty tough assignment that You gave us. The enemy is very, very strong!"

And if He were to reply in today's jargon, I think I could hear Him say to me:

"Well, what else is new? You're telling Me? How do you suppose I found it when I was here? I knew very well when I gave you the assignment it would not be an easy one. But it is a necessary one."

Now there's a text for today's sermon, of course there is. The text is

found in the 5th verse of the 1st chapter of the Gospel according to John.

In my translation it reads like this:

"The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it."

A Christian is meant to respond to his assignment, a Christian is meant to respond to life realistically. But you and I do well at this point to recognize the fact that darkness exists. Evil is all around us. And one of the lamentable things to be said about many of us is this, we permit ourselves to become insensitive to the fact of evil. We may permit ourselves to become ostrichlike and turn away from it. And all the while it's going about its ugly work and raising its ugly head. Evil exists.

Satan is always going about doing his day's work, and night's as well. Sometimes he appears in unexpected places, in quarters where we would never think that he could be found. In every major religion of the world they have always dealt with two forces: Light and Darkness: Good/Evil. The forces contend with one another. The conflict was never more sharply drawn than when Jesus Christ appeared on the scene.....so much so that He could say to His disciples, "I am the Light of the world".....so much so that He could be remembered, that after evil had done its worst, the darkness could not extinguish the light that He had set shining in the world.

But as I reflect upon the day and the contemporary scene, I'm convinced that we're raising a whole new breed of agnostics -- people who are troubled by evil in the world, of course they are -- they'll admit that evil exists -- but they're not so certain in their own minds that good is going to conquer. They will not deny the existence of God, but they will not rush to form a line to claim unqualified belief in His power to conquer evil..

....With what reading I am doing these days I am convinced that we are raising a whole new breed of agnostics, who are so impressed by the fact of evil and its power - - - but seemingly not as impressed by the power of God to conquer.

That's why I come to this desk this morning with so great conviction regarding the meaning of the Ascension, because in the Ascension Jesus Christ returns to Heaven -- victorious -- triumphant -- He did not allow evil to outwit Him.

But how does it go with you, my friend? There are those who keep telling us on every side that evil is in the ascendancy. Even Jesus Christ, who said to us, "You are the church and the gates of hell will not prevail against you" find the church is coming upon hard and difficult times. I am troubled to a degree, of course I am, when I read that twenty years ago when I first came to you, the Church seemed to be riding the crest of the wave. They took polls, too, in those days, of course they did -- 50-to-60% of the population of the United States said that they were aligned with either a church or a synagogue. Now, twenty years later, when a poll was conducted, 70% of those who were asked said that they felt the church had no meaning for them. They could get along very well without it. It had nothing to say, it had nothing to represent that would cause a response from them.

I am equally troubled when I remember that when we first dealt with the possibility of the 'energy crunch' and we began to panic a bit, especially when we read such reports as the White House was thinking of appointing a special commission that would dictate the way fuel would be used....as the first report went out that non-essential users would be denied fuel purchase, and in that category of non-essential users: theaters, restaurants, churches. Does that reflect contemporary thinking? Is that where we rate, even in the society of which we are a part here in the States? -- that we deal in the non-essentials, that society could get along very well without what we represent? That's how great the power of darkness is when evil is at work.

We can understand the mind of the writer in Harper's back in 1873, who had this to say: "When I was young and my world was dominated by indestructible

adults, I learned an ancient way of thinking that is as dangerous as a rotten board in a step ladder. It told me that the only valuable things were those I could hold unchanged: the love of a wise grandfather, the enticing mystery of the trail through our wood lot into the forest, the feeling of lake water on a hot summer day, the colors (an those colours) when I opened my new pencil box on the first day of school . . . But the grandfather died, a developer bulldozed the wood lot, loggers cleared the forest, the lake is polluted and posted against swimming, smog has deadened my ability to detect subtle odors and pencil boxes aren't what they used to be. Neither am I."

The writer had become a cynic, you see, when he read about the pressures of this day and the rampant forces of evil let loose in the world. A sad commentary, of course, but who doesn't feel that way at times when he realizes that things could be taken away from us and smashed by a hard and cruel hand.

But for shame upon the man who wrote those words! There's something invincible about the quality of goodness itself. That that wise old grandfather stood for could never be taken away from the boy that remained in the man's heart. All the love and truth that he represented remains, the memory of a walk through a forest with overhanging branches -- who can take that away from a man?

...they killed Jesus Christ. Evil had done a day's work.

But God was triumphant. He deals in a specialty, a specialty called love and truth remains in our heart. We embrace it...

I remember how intrigued I was when I stood in one of those squares in the city of Prague. One of the grandest cities I think that there must be in the whole world, and how its history reminds me, whether it's legend or not, the principle remains -- they took old John Hus of Bohemia and they tied him at the stake....and then to get the fire burning they tossed all of his writings and his books -- they tied him to the stake with all of his ecclesiastical gear....and as the flames licked up around his body he laughed -- laughed at the folly of men who thought that they could destroy an idea.

Ideas are indestructible. There's an interesting translation of the prologue of John. Sometimes it is translated, instead of saying, "In the beginning was the Word" . . . really perhaps, it's translated: "In the beginning was the Idea" -- God's idea -- God's-idea-come-to-us-in-human-form eventually appeared.

The text has twin thoughts LIGHT / DARKNESS. The light shines in darkness. The believer accepts the fact of evil. He accepts the fact of darkness. And one reason that draws me to Lutheran theology is the basic acceptance that every single one of us is a sinner, and remains a sinner to the day that he dies -- so powerful is the force of evil. And while I am willing to believe that 95% of you are here today who happen to be here last Sunday, we all begin at the same point in which we began last week -- we're sinners. But we're sinners who are being redeemed.

Knowing human nature as I do, even while this sermon is being preached, some of you may be half-guessed to keep the devil out of your minds and out of your hearts. Even before this day is ended, even after you have been to church, you may succumb to evil. It's there. Not so much *how* powerful it is, it never gets beyond being the second-most-powerful force in the world. Good is always greater. God remains triumphant. When I am tempted to despair I need to remember that. The light shines in darkness, alright. But darkness can never put it out. So Jesus Christ at the time of the Ascension said, "Here, the torch is yours. You carry the light now."

And I conclude this sermon by reminding you that when I am prone to curse the darkness I know that there is something better to be done, and that's just to hold my light a little bit higher, to direct my energies in that way, rather than to curse evil. And I also know that instead of spending my energies talking about the evil that exists, that God expects me, where I happen to be, to become one less rascal in the world. Now that's something to think about.

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"MISSION ACCOMPLISHED"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

When something can be captured and reflected as magnificently and as majestically as that, as the singing of the hymn with which we've just dealt, surely the event itself ought not to be forgotten. It's in that manner and in that mood that I come to this sacred desk on this, the Sunday after the Ascension of our Blessed Lord.

Surely the Ascension doesn't have nearly the appeal of Christmas, surely not the appeal of Easter. But for shame upon us if we should ever allow it to become a forgotten day in the calendar of the Church.

Let me immediately remind you what Ascension represents. It represents above all else achievement and victory. The assignment given to our Blessed Lord had been accomplished. He did all that the Father had required of Him. He did it victoriously. Now having lived His measure of years upon earth, He returned to Heaven -- as Victor -- mission accomplished, triumphantly so.

In keeping with you I sit back every now and then and think about what could be referred to as "Great Moments" in one's life. I remember when I first went to the Holy Land and stood one night on the Mount of the Ascension. I did exactly what you would have done, I tried to identify with what took place there. I tried to think of how Jesus Christ, having spent three years, then appeared there for the last time to His disciples and friends, and as He returned to Heaven He gave them a parting command, and He said -- "Now, you go -- you preach, you teach, you make disciples, you baptize....you be my witnesses."

"IT DIDN'T JUST HAPPEN"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

I'm not so sure that anything ever is as was. Yet down deep inside each one of us there's an earnest desire to have whatever it is that once happened as a very wonderful thing repeated. Whether it was a whisper, whether it was a sharp, clear voice, I cannot tell you, but it's been recorded as a matter of history that an old gentleman once marked the path that led to the final resting place of the founder of the Salvation Army....and as he knelt there at the grave, these are the words that he spoke: "O Lord, do it again! - - O Lord, do it again - - let it happen once more!"

You know, of course you do, that when God touched the soul of Bramwell Booth He set him on fire. The zeal that was let loose in that man's life transformed the face of England. He took the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ from within the walls of the church out into the streets, to the slums, and allowed himself to believe that any single soul, no matter how deprived, was still a child of God. He was a straight-shooter-for-souls, that's what he was - - old General Bramwell Booth . . .

.....the old man's desire remained:

if only it could happen again, if you could have more
of that type in this, our day.

And that's how some of us feel when we think about the original Pentecost, the event that we celebrate as we come together this day in this place. It was the birthday of the Christian Church, it was a time when believers had gathered and they were empowered by the Spirit of God and they were let loose upon a world that they were able to turn upside-down! Imagine that! Imagine a group

of people just about the number of those who are here right now, having something happen to you that would cause you to go out and so witness for Christ -- magnificently -- that the course of history would be altered and the world could never again be the same!

They did it so well, that group of people about our number who are here right now, that it was recorded in the sacred writings that they were a people who turned the world upside-down.

If we have an earnest desire to have that event duplicated, to have the Spirit rest upon us as it rested upon them, I'm in duty bound to tell you that nothing ever just happens. You may read for yourself this second chapter of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles and you may think it was a spontaneous thing that occurred, but honestly now -- nothing ever just happens! -- even with God. God has a time schedule. Even with God, there is the necessary prelude before any event, and the preparation that must take place beforehand. Nothing ever just happens. Pentecost did not just happen. It occurred after certain conditions had been met, and we do well to remind ourselves of those conditions today.

First, they were where they were because they were a people under orders. The Bible says "they were gathered together in one accord and in one place" -- they were there because they were following the orders of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ had said to them, "Now you wait! You stay in Jerusalem."

Maybe it didn't make much sense to them. Maybe it didn't. And they couldn't quite figure it out, but nonetheless they obeyed Him. Miracles usually begin to happen when people begin to obey Jesus Christ and take Him at His word. I find myself with certain moments when I think of the miracles that could happen in this congregation that we cherish, when all of us would take Jesus Christ seriously enough to obey Him. Think what would happen if every day, every one

of us in his waking moments would say, "Here I am, Jesus Christ - - you're my Lord and my Master. I'm reporting for duty. What is it that you want me to do today?" Most of us run the course of any day following our own desires, and shoved around and pushed around by the desires of other people. But if you want some kind of a transformation to set in sometime, begin today by saying, "Jesus Christ, Lord and Master of my life, let me obey You this day."

Well, that's the first condition that was met . . . they were a people under orders. They stayed there because that's exactly what He told them to do.

The second condition that was met is this: He said they were not only to stay there but they were to stay together. But I don't think that was very easy. I'm going to read between the lines, if you don't mind, as I try to visualize the kind of people that they were -- very much as we are! And they got on one another's nerves -- I think at the very beginning they did -- they irritated one another, because all of them were guilt-stricken. You see, they remembered that they were the ones who had sold their Master short....

...one had denied

...one had betrayed

...when the chips were down they all disappeared

...now they were guilt-stricken. This same Jesus Christ whom they had short-changed had come back to them and said, "I still love you . . . I still have need for you . . we'll begin all over again." And if that isn't enough to cause a person to become guilt-stricken, I don't know what is, when love as wonderful as that comes back and claims us.

Well as they begin to huddle together, guilt-stricken as they were, I can hear one of them (you choose whichever one you want) saying, "Peter, you and your big mouth! If you had only kept quiet, I wouldn't have chickened out... but when I saw how you denied Jesus, that took the carpet right out from

under my feet - - I had no encouragement to remain faithful. Peter, I would have stayed by Him if you would have. But you didn't. So I didn't either."

....well that's the kind of talk maybe that went on
among themselves. I don't think it was easy for them
to stay together at the very beginning.....

....but then they remembered that they were told to stay together, and the more they remembered that, the more they were impressed by the fact that the love of God had drawn them together. It was the one thing that they had in common. Every one of them a sinner? -- yes -- but a sinner being claimed and re-claimed by the love of God as manifested by Jesus Christ.

And miracles always begin to happen when I can look upon you as no bigger nor no less a sinner than I am.....and you look upon me in the same way. And we say to ourselves, we stand on level ground. None of us has an advantage. We're all guilty. We've all been through this thing together, but Jesus Christ says, "I am going to treat you all alike."

Miracles could begin to happen all over again in this congregation when we allow ourselves to believe that. We're all in this together, as God has need of us and a work to be done. I say it advisedly, miracles could begin to happen all over again. You know we are a people of miracles, when I remember what you told me, you who were on the scene before some of us arrived, how difficult it was for you to stick together in the early years when you went around from one place to another, meeting in a borrowed hall or a borrowed theatre. But you stuck together, you who were here before we came. Miracles begin to happen as long as you stayed together.

And then you were claimed by a common purpose, an allegiance to Him who is the great King and the Head of the Church. And when I think as I read a bit of the history that happened before we came on the scene, when they said we ought to have a place of our own on which to build - - - they didn't even have enough

credit, so I am told, to go to the bank to borrow money. So one of the members of the group advanced the four or six thousand dollars, whatever it was, to buy this lot.....

....and then when I think how miracles continued to happen, when the time came to build, they built a place of worship to accommodate four times the size of their present congregation. They could have leveled off to suit themselves, but they thought of the future.... Miracles always begin to happen when you allow Jesus Christ, the great King and Head of the Church, to direct your course, and you remain subservient to Him. So on this day of Pentecost we who come here find ourselves saying:

"Do it again! Do it again! Empower us by

Your Holy Spirit!"

On this Day of Pentecost in recent years we've introduced into these morning hours the very significant re-affirmation of our Confirmation vows. When you come this afternoon you will be impressed by the fact that the Confirmand stands before the altar and he's asked: "Do you love the Lord Jesus and do you promise to serve Him through His Holy Church?" - - and then he answers, "Yes, with my whole heart." We do well to go back now and remember how we made that promise, to ask ourselves very searchingly, how well are we keeping it? Well - let's re-affirm it.....now.....

.....and as you look back, think of the place, where it was, where you gave your life to the Lord. Maybe you can catch a glimpse anew of the pastor's face....maybe you can feel the gentle pressure of his hand upon your head....maybe you can hear the voices of those who taught you. Let all of that happen now as we look back and remember.....

But now, in the name of Him who is the Great King and Head of the Church I ask you: Do you make that promise all over again to love and serve Him all the days of your years? If so, answer, Yes, I promise again.

(Response)

Our Father in Heaven for Jesus' sake renew and increase in thee
the gift of the Holy Ghost, to thy growth in grace,
to thy strengthening in faith,
to thy patience in suffering,
and to the blessed hope of everlasting life. Amen.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father, and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

When it was made known to me what you had decided as the theme of your banner, from that moment on there was only one text that would claim my attention as far as the preaching of this sermon is concerned. For the banner-making committee chose very wisely the words from that very interesting book of the Bible called the Book of the Revelation; the 10th verse of the 2nd chapter:

"Be thou faithful unto death, and
I will give thee a crown of life."

What can I tell you now that I haven't already told you, I who have had the good fortune to be part of your life, in many instances, from the very day that you were born. Did I not hold you in the crook of my arm and name you for Jesus Christ? Did I not stand with you and your parents when they made promises that have consummated in this very precious moment which is part of your lives as long as you live? - - what can I say to you now that I have not already told you?

Perhaps I will repeat myself, if not in words then in the theme of themes. I'll begin by telling you that as far as God is concerned, He is a very demanding God. God is never one to let us off very easily. God is always asking a great deal from us. And on this, your day of Confirmation, I am in duty bound to say to you that as you line up on His side, and as you come with those of us who have been trying to follow Him now for a number of years and who this very morning re-affirmed our faith in Him and committed ourselves to Him all over again, I can tell you this, that when you sign up for Him, He'll settle for nothing less than signing up for the rest of your life.

-- Today you are saying that you are going to be faithful to Him all the days of your years -- not simply for the balance of 1976.

-- Today you are saying that you are signing up for Him -- not simply as long as all the world looks favorably upon Christians . . .

-- Today you are signing up for Him - - not simply for as long as your feel like loving and serving Him

-- Today you're saying that you're signing up for Jesus Christ until the very end of your life, until you breathe your very last. God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ doesn't give us any other choice. He has no such thing as limited terms.....He has no such thing as a short-term Christian. He has no such thing as a five-year plan. As far as you're concerned, He's signing you up for life - - - and that also means that wherever you may happen to be, God expects you to be faithful there and then.

Oh, it's very easy to be faithful when you're here. It's very easy to be faithful when some of us are around, in holy tones if not otherwise -- remind you of who you are and what you're meant to do and what you're meant to become. But quite honestly, as much as I would like to, I can't follow you around for the rest of your life.....I won't be able to go with all of you as soon as this benediction is pronounced and stand within the shadows and whisper in your ear: "No! - No! You can't do that! -- Remember - the promises you made!" I can't do that for you.....Pastor David can't do that for you.....Sister Mildred can't do that for you.....your small-group teacher can't do that for you.....even your parents can't do that for you! But nonetheless in this service today you're making a promise to be faithful as long as you live, and that means no matter where you go. Which means that you will be pretty much on your own time and time again, and always there will be those who try to get you to be less than faithful to Jesus Christ.

I wish I could tell you that it's going to be a very easy thing for you to be a Christian. I don't want to shock you, but would you believe me if I were to tell you that the older I get, sometimes I discover the tougher it is to be a Christian. Would you believe me if I were to tell you that?

And would you believe me if I were to tell you that the more I want to love and serve Jesus Christ, the more the devil keeps on my tail and crowds in on me? -- in ways that you might never begin to imagine. But then I have to remind myself, as I'm asking you to remind yourself: Be faithful...Be faithful. -- a free translation is: Stick with it! Stick with it! Don't forget it.

And I should also tell you this, that some days you'll fail miserably. Honestly you will. There are days when I wished that perhaps I hadn't gotten up, because I didn't fulfill my promise to my Lord as well as I had promised Him. But wouldn't it be a terrible thing if that's the only thing I could tell you? I have this to tell you, that you happen to have a Master in Jesus Christ who loves you. And when the days come that you fail Him -- if you can imagine Him doing this now....

(and don't ever hesitate to exercise a sanctified
sort of imagination)

....if you can imagine it -- picture Jesus Christ coming to you where you are when you've disappointed Him and other people, and putting His arm around you and saying, "If you're really sorry, I forgive you. Let's try tomorrow all over again." That's the kind of faithfulness He offers to us. He never gives up on us. He asks that we try never to give up on Him.

I have something very precious to tell you, and I think I am 100% correct when I tell you this -- anyone who has ever signed up for Jesus Christ has never, never regretted it. And every single one who has forgotten the promise

that he's made, and got away from it, regretted that.

"Be thou faithful unto death, and I

will give thee a crown of life."

Heaven belongs to those who arrive. Heaven belongs to those, not who are perfect, but who are loyal.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"BE THOU FAITHFUL"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

I presume I could very rightfully begin by asking you, what can I tell you now that I have not already told you? Practically all of the preaching that some of you have heard has been the preaching that has come from this pulpit. You have heard this voice before many times over.

And did I not take you in the crook of my arm at that baptismal font and name you for Jesus Christ? That simply means that from the day you were born until this very moment, where this person is concerned and that person is concerned, God has allowed me to have a very real part in your life. And I'm not unmindful of so holy a privilege.

What can I tell you now that I haven't already told you, and particularly as week after week since last October we've gathered together in Tuesday sessions?.....and how some of you have met with me even in a smaller group, and we've talked about the great teachings of Christ. What can I tell you that I haven't already told you?

Yet when I anticipated the privilege of standing here and preaching the sermon on your Confirmation Day, as soon as I knew what the text was for your banner, I knew very well what I would say to you, and what text would inspire my thoughts. For you have chosen for your banner the words from that interesting book of the Bible, the Book of the Revelation, the 10th verse, the 2nd chapter:

"Be thou faithful unto death and I
will give thee a crown of life."

I am happy indeed that you chose the text. And I suppose if upon reflection I would have said to Pastor David, why don't we preach a dialogue sermon this year for Confirmation? -- we've never done that for Confirmation -- and I'm inclined to think that he would have probably said, "by all means, I'd be happy to do it".....because, you see, I can tell you what you may not know at this point -- Revelation 2:10 was his Confirmation verse, and now for over twenty years that verse of Scripture has been etched upon the fabric of his heart, it's been like a lodestar in his life, it's been a guiding theme....

....and when he was ordained a Minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it was that text that was referred to in the printed folder.....

It is a very precious text -- for you -- for him -- and for any member of your class who may have chosen it as a Confirmation Verse.

Well now, on with the brief sermon that I want to preach to you now.

"Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life."

The first observation is this: when you sign up with Jesus Christ -- and that's exactly what you're doing today, you are the most recent recruits for the Kingdom of God. God is always looking for followers. You're the most recent ones to sign up.....and when you sign up, let it be clearly understood, you are not signing up for limited service -- that is, for a certain amount of time in your life. God is very demanding. He's always been that way. He won't settle for a half-of-a-job. He won't settle for a part of your life. That's why, significantly enough, when you make a promise today in the shadow of this altar, you will answer: "Yes, with my whole heart" -- not with just part of it. And so at the very beginning the admonition is this: "Be faithful unto the very end" . . . not just until you're 21....not just until you're 32.....but

be faithful unto the very end of life.

I took the small group that I've been teaching to visit Grossmudder this past Tuesday. The eight or nine of us went up there to pay her a visit. She's 91 years of age, and those of you who went with me may remember how even though we had a little time with her, I said to you, "Now you look into the face of a woman who for all these years of her life has faithfully followed Jesus Christ. She has the look of a saint upon her face, she has an inner glow. She has peace in her heart, because when she committed herself to Jesus Christ she's reaped the joy of faithfulness." So you sign up for all the days of your years.

The second observation is this: that when you sign up, even though you may sign up for all the rest of your life, please remind yourself of that every day. Whether you realize it or not, whenever anybody takes a journey, do you know what? - - they begin that journey each day all over. If they travel a certain distance to Tuesday morning, then when they get up on Tuesday morning they decide to keep moving in that same direction the next day, and the next day, and the next day. To all intents and purposes, make up your mind each day to commit yourself all over again to the promise that you've made.

Martin Luther, so I am told, kept his sanity when he came upon very difficult days because he said each day to himself: "I am baptized! I'm God's child!" - - he had no other course to take but to live out the rest of his years in a way that pleased his Master. So now you're signing up for the rest of your life . . . but each day remind yourself that you've signed up for the rest of your life, so that there's no turning back.

From my vantage-point now, I made the same commitment that you did, a

number of years ago, and don't be frightened when I tell you this -- it gets harder sometimes. Some days it's far more difficult to be faithful to Him than other days. I'm quite ashamed of myself when I go to bed certain nights and look back over the course of the day and discover that I did not represent my faithfulness to my Lord as well as I should have. There were things that I should have said that I didn't say -- there were things that I should have done that I didn't do. It was very hard for me to be faithful, and I had my moments when it seemed as though I had chickened out. I'm sorry to have to tell you that.

But then Jesus Christ never promised us that it would be easy. But He did promise us something else. He promised us that He'd never fail us, He'd always be there, within reach. And when this anthem that's going to be sung during the offering -- and you pay attention to it, carefully chosen -- expresses it beautifully.....that Jesus Christ will not only be your Master and your guide, He's also your Friend.

You may not like me to have to tell you this, but some days you're going to fail miserably, just as I have failed. But I'm happy to tell you, He won't disown you. If you can imagine this -- and it's a very wonderful thing to have the gift of a sanctified imagination -- try to picture Jesus Christ coming to you and saying, "I know you've failed Me".....and then see Him put His arm around your shoulder and say, "But let's try again." He'll always be coming to you, and to give you another chance. He'll be faithful. Now -- you be just as faithful to Him. But you can't do it on your own. And that's why you're honest enough, and we're honest enough to say to you, that the answer you give is : "Yes, with God's help." And God never asks you to make a promise but what He won't help you to keep that promise!

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"EVENTUALLY -- WHY NOT NOW?"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

1
67

If it's a title that you will be wanting for today's sermon, let me suggest these words: "Eventually -- Why Not Now?" And the text, the 4th verse of the 9th chapter of the Gospel according to John:

"We must work the works of him who sent me
while it is day. The night comes when no
one can work."

Really now, don't look so much upon this as the preaching of a sermon. If it's at all possible, look upon it as a conversation that you and I could have as we would sit quietly in my study and I would like to talk with you very, very earnestly. For if, when our Blessed Lord was here on earth, He could stand with a group of people and then look out yonder on the Galilean-Judean hillside and see a peasant or a farmer reaching into a bag of seed and then scattering it.....and that would prompt something in the mind of Jesus, and He'd talk to the little cluster of people around Him about the truth that was inspired -- -- in much that same manner, and in that very same mood, I want to talk to you about something that I encountered.

It might surprise you when I tell you it happened in Tower Nine, the Bethesda Medical Naval Center. Incidentally, I ought to tell you that in my judgment the elevator over there in that tower must be the slowest elevators in the world. They try the patience of anyone who stands as he wants to ascend to one of the other levels.

Well, interestingly enough, I think that it must also serve a purpose because of the way the tower is structured. The elevator will take you up

eventually, and then when the doors open it seems as though you enter into a suite of rooms, because the space is rather open, and then round about on every side, close by -- hardly individual rooms.....so located, it seems to me, as though every room is right next door to every other room that happens to be there. That lends itself to a kind of camaraderie.

Now you have to understand this for what I am going to tell you. One of our finest members was admitted there the end of May -- a former member, I suppose, because having moved to Pennsylvania he established his membership with a congregation close at hand, as well he should. But Dwane Yoder came back to Bethesda -- he's a Captain in the Navy -- for open heart surgery. And when I would go to visit with Dwane he would tell me the kind of thing that he's experienced.

Not very many are located there in Tower Nine -- it seems just a handful of patients. But they're all in the same thing together, you understand that, don't you? Every single person who happens to be there in that certain area is terribly, terribly conscious of the fact that his is extremely critical surgery. Oh, they've had remarkable success, there's no question about that. But any time you open a man's heart you're dealing with something extremely critical.

Well, that does something. He was telling me how these people minister to one another. No one becomes a stranger. Within a reasonable period of time your case history is known almost to everybody else who's there. And they know when you're scheduled for surgery, and they'll know something about the procedure, and they'll anticipate the amount of time that it will take.

...then the night before it's as though -- well, a quiet hush descends upon the place. And then everyone seems to rise to the occasion. You recognize it -- you know that this happens to be a person who is going

to undergo it, a person much like yourself. You're not just a number....you're not just a classification on a chart. And after a while you're known to the other people by your family relationships, those who are dependent upon you. And inevitably the total picture is cast, you see what would happen if the inevitable were to occur, and what this would mean to them.....

And after it's all said and done, it just seems as though people begin to treat one another the way they ought to treat one another all the time -- with great compassion, with great concern. And people who have never been known to pray with somebody before will make reference to the fact -- "Well, I will be praying for you". Now, no matter what route that person takes to the Throne of Grace, or how infrequently he may have taken that route, he gives you that assurance that he's going to do it.

Well all I can say to you is this, that for a brief period of time all of a sudden people begin to behave the way God intended them to behave all the time! -- under any given circumstances!

And that led me to come to you this morning to speak to you very earnestly. Sometimes when the chips are down, we rise to the occasion. We practice a remarkable measure of Christian compassion and concern. My thought is this: if we can do it eventually -- why not now? Or on the other hand -- why wait until the prospect is in front of you that life could be taken away from you, to begin to live? And there are folks like that, who never really begin to plumb the depths until they have to count life in terms of months....even in weeks. If eventually -- why not now?

I had a traumatic experience the other day. It may seem ridiculous to you, and if it should then I simply pray that some day you might have the

sensitivity that it commands to appreciate it. In my waking moments one morning last week it seemed as though God had a personal representative standing by my side, and I heard the voice from Heaven say, "Prove to me -- what right do you have to another day?"

....now if you and I each day had to prove the right to live another day, how differently we could see it....or if you and I knew that our days were specifically numbered, how earnestly we might live the next twenty-four hours....

I am fully convinced that some of us never really begin to live until we know that maybe our days are numbered.

I told you about Carl Hall, the Boy Scout executive in my home town community, who one day was greeted by a friend on a blustery March morning, a terrible, miserable day: "How are you today?" Carl, who had been told that he had inoperable cancer, replied: "Great!" And his friend said to him, "Carl, in your condition, how can you say that?" And he said, "In my condition, any day is a good day."

God gives us life. We have no guarantee of how long we're going to have it, and there's nothing morbid about the preaching of this sermon, God forbid. But down deep inside of us, each of us thinks how one day we'll get around to sharing all that love that we'd like to share with people....one day maybe we will get around to saying all the nice things that we feel we ought to say -- one day maybe we will write that letter that ought to have been written six months ago -- maybe one day we'll get around -- I am thinking: eventually -- sure you will!granted you have the time. But why not now?

I like to think of the homespun illustration. It goes back to the days when the trains were in their hey-day....and there was the old crochety soul who got on the train at a certain point in Pennsylvania, her first train ride.

She grumbled and complained all the while she was on the train, when much to her surprise the conductor announced her destination. She gathered her bags together and she was heard to mumble, "If I'd known the trip was going to be so short I'd have enjoyed it more."

How do you suppose you'd feel if, while you are still alive, you read your obituary notice in the paper? Now think of what you'd like to have said about you -- all your noble ambitions, your dreams -- and maybe they said it. You'd have to ask yourself, honestly now, is it really that true? Am I that good? - - - all that you'd like to have said about you, now.

Well Alfred Nobel had the unusual experience of having his obituary printed in the paper while he was still alive. What happened was this: somebody in France in the wire services got the names confused, and thought it was his brother who died, and Alfred Nobel read in the paper his obituary -- "The Dynamite King" -- a man who had spent his energy in producing these things that could be so explosive, and destroy civilization and destroy people and what they represent. It changed his life. Is this what I want people to say about me eventually? he thought.....that's where you get your Nobel Peace Prize. And from that moment on he said, "I will throw my energy in trying to work for peace and good-will among men." Eventually? -- why not now?

I have my moments when I meet with our staff, a precious group of people here in Saint Luke Church, committed and capable -- they may get tired of this, but every now and then I keep saying this, that if we can't reflect here in Saint Luke Church a bit of Heaven, where, then, is Heaven to be reflected? If we can't begin to live as Christians with one another in the here and now, when will we ever get around to it? And that's one of the strengths, I think, about you, members of Saint Luke, because some of us are praying that this will be true for you, that Saint Luke can represent to the Church-at-large what a Christian congregation is meant to be -- not a dream to be fulfilled fifty years

from now.....but today. Eventually? -- come now, why not today?

Well maybe some of us won't get around to it because we've never been close enough to having some things taken away from us. And I honestly believe that some folks never begin to live until they have had a skirt with death. Winifred and I have in our close circle of friends a woman for whom I have the highest and deepest regard -- as fully an integrated a person as I have ever known, a woman of tremendous strength. One day I said to her, how did you get this way? And immediately she replied, whether she had become a teenager yet, I don't know, but when she was young they lived on a farm....she fell down a well.....and was there in the darkness of that hole for hours until she was rescued. She had a skirt with death. She knew what it was to have the possibility of it taken away.

....she also told me that when she was young their house burned to the ground, and they lost all of their earthly possessions. She knew what it was, at an early age, to have to get along without things.

Well, eventually every one of us dies naked. Eventually every one of us appears naked before God -- not much to clutch to.

Eventually we'll have to be just what we are and what we hope to be.

Why not now? Why not now?

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"TROUBLES - - PROBLEMS"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from his Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

A month has come and gone since we had that "Gigantic Garage Sale" in the upper parking lot sponsored by Tent Troupe and Youth Ministry. I was numbered among you, those of you who were eager to get there, because I'm always fascinated to see what people bring. I'm equally fascinated to see what people will buy. What is one person's trash could become somebody else's treasure. That's about the way it works.

As I went around from stand to stand I suddenly found something that took my eye and my fancy and I wanted it. I made the purchase....and yet that's not exactly true, because I didn't have the 35¢ in my pocket and Mae Troxler helped me out.....and this is what I got - - - you can't see it from where you are, but I have a name for this character - it's an artist's caricature, of course it is.....I call him "Troubles."

He's not a very handsome-looking chap, about as homely as they come. God passed him by that day -- He must have been thinking of all the rest of you!! But the thing that strikes you when you look at the fellow is that there are crocodile tears being shed. So I call him "Troubles." And I place him in the church office. And now, speaking rather facetiously, I'm all set for you when you next come with all the trouble that besets you, and I'll say, "And you think you have troubles?"

Well, that leads me to today's sermon. Troubles..troubles...troubles -- Problems...problems...problems. We all have problems. There are big problems,

there are little problems. There are problems that arise just because you happen to be where you are and you find yourself in a situation from which you cannot escape - - problems not of your making, but honestly now, sometimes there are problems of our creating.

There are people like that, you know. I tell you quite frankly, I think of some of my colleagues in the ministry, and I follow them around from parish to parish where they serve for about three-to-five years at a time, and no matter where they go, when I see them, they talk about their problems. And I know them full well, their problems that they've helped to create. There are people like that.

Problems.....problems.....problems - - we all have problems.....

...big....little.....unusual problems....

...and some of us go to bed at night and thank God that we don't have the problems that somebody else has. But problems we have.

I remember how foolish I was when I became 40 years of age (not that I have matured so much beyond that, but I do remember) -- that I allowed myself to think that maybe when I'd hit 40, that all the great problems of life, as far as I was concerned, would have been pretty well dealt with. How stupid can one become? If life teaches us anything, life dramatically proves that we go from one age to another and exchange one set of problems for another. If a man is foolish enough to think that he doesn't have problems, he might be like that character in Bernard Shaw's play called Dr. Cannock -- where the fellow says, "If you think you're well, it's simply that you don't know that you're sick." We all have problems.

These are prefatory remarks as I introduce the Scripture passage which serves as the basis for today's sermon. You will find it in more than one Gospel record. It was that ever-popular incident -- every Sunday School

scholar knows it -- perhaps the most well-known of all the miracles that Jesus performed -- the miracle of the Feeding the Multitude. You can check it out in Matthew, if you wish, you can check it out in John, be that as it may. But very quickly now let me bring you up to date and remind you of the incident.

He was a great preacher. And that day in particular He held them spell-bound as He went on, if you please, hour after hour after hour. And when He finally finished it occurred to Him that the hour had grown late.

Now the people in that day, even as there are many people in that part of the world at the present time, never get much to eat. And they also suffer from malnutrition. And that's why you can understand the commend that the Gospel writer says, "They ought to have something to eat because some of them came a great distance, and they will faint by the way before they get home."

.....so you have Jesus Christ looking the situation over, and He says, "Now where are we going to get bread for the people to eat?"
Now we're talking about problems.

You'll notice first off that it's Jesus Christ who calls to their attention the fact that a problem exists. Now this is very important. Some people never get their problems resolved because they never even know that they exist to begin with. I sing the praise of Jesus Christ for more than one reason - - not only because He's my Lord and my Saviour - - not only because He's my Master and my friend. Because I've gained a new appreciation for Jesus Christ.....the longer I read about Him, the longer I think about Him, the longer I enjoy His presence and His companionship, the more I discover that He's always calling to my attention the problems that exist in my life.

Now you read the New Testament as though you had never read it before, and see how again and ever so often, no matter where He went, He was calling to the attention of people the problems in which they found themselves. And He was forever dealing with their problems. But God has a way of doing this for us, and this is one of the functions, one of the purposes that's served by the Christian Church - - to sensitize people, to alert people, to the problems of society, problems of the world, problems of individuals. The Church seems to be a kind of specialist in this kind of thinking -- saying "Here is the problem". Well that's the first thing that Jesus Christ did. He said, We have a problem on our hands.

And now it's not enough to call one's attention to a problem and just go on talking about the fact that a problem exists. Do you realize how many wheels we spin, how much energy we burn up needlessly, after we've discovered that the problem is there, simply talking about the fact that the problem exists? Well then Jesus Christ goes on and He says, "What are you going to do about it? - - What are you going to do about it?"

Honestly now, I don't know of very many problems that Jesus Christ, or God, has ever solved by Himself and by Himself alone. When a situation exists that needs remedying, like as not God looked around for somebody who has a pair of hands, a pair of lips, and through a heart that throbs and beats, a mind that thinks. And then He focuses His attention upon us, as much as to say, the ball is in your corner. Get with it! What are you going to do about it?

....Whether you like it or not, when it comes to this whole matter of dealing with problems, it's a very salutary thing when a man discovers that he's meant to be part of the answer, not simply to dwell on the fact that he's probably part of the problem, and the problem itself.

So the next step is, you look around for available resources. Is there anything that you might be able to do about it? -- you, not somebody else. I'm going to give vent to my frustrations for the moment. They occur on two different occasions.....

....one, when a problem exists, and the person most related to it will allow himself to believe that it's somebody else's problem. That's a dastardly thing. Jesus Christ looked at His disciples - - He said, it's your problem -- it's our problem -- not somebody else's. We're the ones who are meant to be compassionate, we are the ones who are meant to be kind. We are the ones who have been given a set of principles. It's our problem.

.....and then the next step: you look around for available resources and you find some. In this case one of the disciples found a boy with a lunch. You know the story - - - this is wonderful! Somebody got all excited. Here was a ray of hope - - - fish.....bread - - - this is great!

....then they had to spoil it. This is what leads to my next frustration - - when people begin to find a handle on which they can lay hold, somebody else begins to speak disparagingly and says, "So what? What can you do with that?"

...and that's exactly what happened when this miracle was in the process of being performed. There were those who said, "a boy's lunch?" - - - well, if you want the Scriptural expression: "What is that among so many?" That's precisely the point at which some people bog down when they have to deal with a problem: they can deal only with the negative aspect. They can't possibly see how you can get the thing off the ground when you don't have much to deal with..

(this is my problem and I am sorry you have to suffer with it)

Alright then, says Jesus, let's have what you have, let me have what you have.

...and that's the only way you can get a lot out of a little, when you take the little that you have and you give it over to Jesus Christ.

Now before anything else is said, recognize this and recognize it full well, that that youngster could have been very, very selfish. He could have said, "This is my lunch. My mother prepared it for me, and I'm not going to go hungry." But because he was unselfish enough, he gave it over.

I've lived long enough to know that the problems that vex and irritate me most are the problems that remain unresolved until I get myself off dead center. Any man who has a problem and dwells upon the fact that he's to be pitied because the problem exists is basically selfish. Any person who feels that he has a problem because somebody else has done him in, and dwells on it, is basically selfish. As long as I think of her I'll be in her debt. She told me some time ago about a problem that she had a number of years ago. It was irritating -- there was so much uncertainty, and she wasn't quite sure how it could ever be handled. But then, then it occurred to her that her attitude had to change. And when she got beyond the point of pitying herself, she began to reach the place where she could deal with it. Think what would have happened that day if the little boy would have pitied himself and said, "They've taken away my lunch . . . they've made me adjust to the situation . . . they've forced me to give up something . . . " Problems will never be resolved until we learn to get ourselves off dead center.

The greatest of all problems that any of us has, you know, is sin. Thanks to Jesus Christ, He's always calling it to our attention. You can't be in the presence of Jesus Christ very long without being aware of the fact that you're a sinner. And that's one reason why some of us love Him - - because He

pricks our conscience and makes us aware of the fact that we are sinners.

....yet do you realize that some of us never get our problems resolved because when people are bold enough and honest enough to bring to our attention the problem and to call it by its rightful name, we resent this. And we break off our friendship with them -- because we don't like to be told that we're part of the problem, or that we create the problem.....

It's like in the old Greek dramatic productions -- they'd shoot the messenger rather than to come face to face with the issue itself.

Now going back to this problem of sin. You know that the center of sin is - - what the center letter of sin is: it's I. Eventually some of us discover that for ourselves, with the help of God and with some good friends. The problem will never be resolved until we think less in terms of ourselves. That little boy, he forgot how hungry he was, and when he thought in terms of all the other people, things began to happen . . . a blessing was let loose!

Stick with Jesus Christ and your problem, my friend. The closer you stick to Him the more often wonderful things will always begin to happen! I suggest that all of us remember that God never made any of us big enough to handle the problems by ourselves. And that's why He's always within reach. This I most certainly believe.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

June 27, 1976

"NO GREATER RESPONSIBILITY"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

I'm not about to preach the sermon that was scheduled for this hour, but rather from the overflow of my heart I want to talk to you about what has happened within these walls up to this point this morning, particularly, of course, during this hour.

Scripture has it recorded in this way:

"And He took them up into His arms and
He blessed them."

It's the unforgettable picture of Jesus Christ with a child. When our blessed Lord was here on earth He went to many places and He did many things. But one has reason to believe that there was no more precious moment in His life than when He held a child in His arms.

You recognize the fact, of course you do, that He himself never became a father. He remained unmarried. He never knew the joy of looking into the eyes of a child and saying to himself, this is flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood. But He did have the abiding satisfaction of whenever He saw a child, of being able to say, "This is a child of our Heavenly Father." And He tried to establish this clearly in the minds of people, that every child is precious because every child has a Heavenly Father.

We are fortunate here in Saint Luke Church that we give a good and proper accent to every facet of our ministry. The spectrum is very wide -- while we think of ourselves sometimes as an unusually young congregation, yet we are growing older, and we have a significant number of people who are in the senior citizen group, and we're grateful for this. But at the opposite end

of the spectrum God has blessed us richly with those who are young, for whom we have no greater responsibility.

Did it ever occur to you that as you've called a staff to minister to you in Saint Luke Church, that do all intents and purposes a very high percentage of those who serve on our staff devote their time and energy to those who are young? -- the greater part of the extension of the ministry of Christian Education is for those who are under 18 years of age -- we've called to our staff another pastor who devotes so much of his time and his talent and his energy to a group of people that constitute almost a congregation in themselves, between 400 and 500 young people. Half of the congregations in the Maryland Synod are smaller than that total figure.....

....we have been able to say that in our School of Sacred Music, that of all those enrolled there was a time when two-thirds of them were under eighteen years of age.....

Time and time again as we deal with people here in Saint Luke, we take the child and hold the child in our arms and focus upon the child. God has given us no greater responsibility.

Little do you realize that when you come here on a Sunday morning at 9:45, little do you realize what you are doing in behalf of those who are young. Financially you help provide the base from which we can operate. You can't offer a program without a base. When you come during this hour, or any hour, you bring your gifts to the altar, and you help make possible a ministry in their behalf. Not far more significantly than that is this: that when you come together at 9:45 at this hour, you are being nurtured, you are being ministered to, because those of us who are here are in the sight of God in duty bound to become their example.

This is no small matter. It's a very easy thing for some of us, the older

we become, to use an old-fashioned expression: to 'slacken the reins' a bit and to think that maybe it isn't very important much longer that we should be the kind of people in God's sight we ought always to be. There's always the temptation to allow ourselves measures of liberty, an excuse perhaps, an indiscretion here and there as though it would not matter. Every child needs a hero. Every child needs someone to whom he can look up. When you and I come here together we're asking God to help us to become the kind of a person that becomes an inspiration to a child.

For those of you who are fortunate enough to be in the grandparent stage . . . I remember when I went out to India, land of 500 million people, is it? -- where the average person perhaps doesn't get past 34 - 36, I have forgotten what it is now . . . somebody once said, "What is it that India needs most?" -- and the man came up with a very unusual answer: "India needs grandparents" -- another generation, you see, old enough to set before children a good example and to deal with them with a measure of compassion and understanding. But I suggest to you that any person who is older than a child ought to be something of a grandparent by way of bending over lowly, listening carefully, and dealing compassionately with a child.

What has happened here this evening is enough to gladden the hearts of all of us, to see these bright faces, these happy hearts, these sturdy souls, who have nothing before them but the future, for which we too have a measure of responsibility to face for them. So we're encouraged, you see, to make the investment in them. When our Blessed Lord was born on earth there was that very precious moment when He put a child in the middle of them and focused the attention of all who were present upon the face of a child.

When I am tempted to despair, I have a tonic that I take: I go to my study and I close the door, and I sit down and I look at the desk in front

of me, whether it be here in this corner of God's House, in the administrative office, or in my study at the house, because each place has the photograph of children. And when I am tempted to despair, I think of the fact that God never loses heart, and every time a child is born and put in front of us we have another evidence of the undiscourageableness of God.

I remember reading somewhere - - a terrible earthquake had taken place in Italy. There was death and devastation and destruction on every side. There were a few survivors . . . they were almost without hope until there came into their midst, almost out of nowhere, a tall gaunt Roman Catholic priest, carrying in his arms a child....

....then it was at that point that they
gathered their resources together and they began
to live all over again.

* * * *

(The children from Daily Vacation Church School had sung at the beginning of this service at 9:45 service)

(this sermon transcribed as recorded)

"A SILENT CHRIST"
(Luke 23:9)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

The text is recorded as the 9th verse of the 23rd chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. It consists of four simple words, four simple words that may surprise you. Because it introduces you to a picture of Jesus that you do not ordinarily consider.

You think of Him frequently as one who came preaching....teaching. You think of Him who was always talking to people, as one who always had something to say. Well, these four words are quite to the contrary, the 9th verse, the 23rd chapter of Luke:

"Jesus made no answer."

He had His moments when He could be silent. He had His moments when there wasn't anything to say, and He made up His mind that He wouldn't attempt to do otherwise. Why do I tell you this? Well now listen very carefully. No matter what you may hear to the contrary, they tell me that the Bible is still the best seller. Coming out these days in a very attractive format, now no longer do you read those rigid verse structures, but you have in front of you on one page after another freely flowing paragraphs. And like as not you can get a binding according to the color of your preference. Gratifying, isn't it, to know the Bible is still the best seller.

But I rise with all my ministerial strength to offer a word or two of caution. Just because people buy it, it doesn't necessarily follow that they read it. And no matter how many Bibles you may choose to have on your shelves, if they remain unread it's much like that cake of soap you remember I told you: a cake of soap has little value until you use it.

Another word of caution, that when you do turn to the Good Book and you begin to read, remember and remember full well what Martin Luther said about the Holy Scriptures - - they are to lead us to Jesus Christ. If when you turn to the Good Book and you begin to read, you fail to discover Jesus Christ, if He does not come in clear and proper focus, then you are not reading correctly.

....if when you lay that book aside you are not
possessed by the mind and spirit of Christ, then
you'd better reach for the book and keep reading
until the mind and spirit of Christ possess you....

After all, He is the central character in the book.

Another word of caution, if you don't mind. Be careful how you read it in this light. Don't look upon it as a book that has a series of pat answers. I am somewhat troubled, honestly I am, when I stay in a motel room or a hotel room and find there in front of me a copy of the Bible the Gideons has placed there. Now let me hasten to say, I salute the Gideons for doing what they do. It's an extraordinarily fine thing that they make the Scriptures available. And I'm doubly pleased when I stay at a certain motel chain that authorizes the maid in the room to not go out of that room unless she's made certain that the Bible has been opened, with its pages there invitingly, beckoning one in that direction as you enter the room....

....but what troubles me sometimes is this: that on the
inside of the cover one may read such words as these:

WHERE TO FIND IT IN THE BIBLE

- - if you have had financial reverses, read such-and-
such a passage of Scripture:

....and then it goes on with other situations in life. But the implication is not always a healthy one. Sometimes the implication is that if you read that

certain passage you can re-coup your financial loss. And it doesn't always follow that way. The answers are not always given in a very pat specific way. That's why the text for today's sermon: "Jesus made no answer."

We might be surprised if we read the New Testament as we had not read it before, to discover how frequently Jesus Christ was silent on certain issues and certain matters. There are any number of things to which He never addressed Himself. And yet these are things that concern us. There are some people who have the mistaken notion that if they only reach for the Bible and turn to certain pages, almost computer-like, you press a button, and the answer comes. Well, I'm warning you against that, you're going to be disappointed.

...you know the old story -- you can afford to hear it again -- there was that fellow who thought he'd try the Bible in that way, the Bible would give him guidance in specific things in his life....so he closed his eyes, he said I'll open the page and I'll put my finger down and I'll stop at a certain verse -- whatever that verse tells me, that's what I'm going to do.so when he tried it he opened his eyes . . . his eyes fell upon this verse: "Judas went out and hanged himself."

...he gathered enough courage to try it a second time. This time when he opened the Bible his finger fell upon this verse when his eyes were opened:

"Go thou and do likewise."

Well that cured him. That cured him as well it should cure him, because the Bible was never meant to be handled in that manner. And my heart goes out to people sometimes who feel that the Bible has pat answers. It just doesn't! And we're not fair with the writers of the Bible, we're not fair with God himself when we think that He's addressed himself to all of our specific

situations.

I once knew a man who said his heart went out to people in his parish because they had certain problems as they reached certain stages in life....

...for instance, the man who said, "I'm a Christian and I would like to do the Christian thing -- shall I take an early retirement, or should I go on working?

....well that's a very important question to some people. But nowhere in the Bible will you get an answer specifically to that question!

....or take a person who has retired -- shall I continue living in Maryland, or Virginia, or shall I move to Florida or Arizona?

...which is a very real question for some people.

...shall I sell my house and move into an apartment?

...shall I leave here and go nearer to my son and daughter?

...very real questions. But nowhere in the Bible will you find specific answers to such questions. And people are foolish if they allow themselves to believe that they can turn to the Bible and get a pat answer to a question like that.

There are some things, I say to you again, that Jesus Christ did not touch upon specifically. But I rise quickly to remind you that He did deal specifically with certain things -- with the fact of sin. He dealt specifically with that, alright! -- in clear, sharp-cut terms. He dealt specifically with the fact of Heaven and Hell -- nothing vague about that! Nor was He silent on that question.

- - - He dealt specifically with this business of how you ought to treat people -- we're meant to love them, to love them as Christ loves us. He even gave us a specific standard...there's no problem there!

But when it comes to whether you ought to be Republican or Democrat, you won't get that answer in the Bible.

I sometimes think that there are people who move around on the face of this earth, that live in different parts of the world -- you may be shocked sometimes to discover that Jesus Christ never blessed a particular political order - - or social structure. He did not address Himself to that kind of thing. He made no answer.

He made no answer as far as when people came to try and vex Him, and irritate Him. And when He discovered that they were insensitive to the truth of God, He gave them the silent treatment, that's exactly what He did. He wasted no breath on people who were pronouncedly insincere. He laid it down very rigidly to His followers that once they went into a community, and there was no inclination on the part of the people who lived there to receive what they wanted to give in such a wonderful way, He said,

"Gather up your garments, your clothing,
about you and get out of town. Don't waste
any time on them."

Jesus Christ was silent on occasion when people came and asked about things that they weren't quite ready to answer. Are you aware of that? There are people who came and asked Him certain questions, and He gave them no satisfaction at that point because they were not able to handle the answer that He would have given. You and I need to remember that. There are some times even now in our Christian growth and experience that Jesus Christ gives us the silent treatment. He doesn't answer us specifically because our own spiritual growth and development hasn't reached the point that we would be able to cope with what He would be able to say to us specifically. This I most certainly believe.

And that is why you and I must pray constantly for the gift of the Holy Spirit, that we might be enlightened, that we might better understand His pur-

poses. But because of our frailty there are times when He doesn't tell us everything. He made no answer.

Why have I come to this sacred desk to preach this sermon today? Because I know full well that there are some of you who are inclined on occasion to turn your backs on God because He doesn't speak when you think He ought to speak, and what is more, He doesn't speak in the way you think He ought to speak! And there are some of you who have given up reading the Bible, I dare say, because you don't get pat answers.

What I am pleading with you is this: I am pleading with you to understand that the Bible is a book about God and the spirit of Jesus Christ....the Bible is the hand-book of salvation. The Bible is meant to introduce us to Jesus Christ and to give us His mind and His spirit. And according to His mind and His spirit, then when the situation arises, we act according to the mind and spirit of Jesus Christ then and there.

There is also another verse in the Bible that has tremendous strength in it: "He who wills to do the will of God, he will know."

Maybe that should be our greater concern. How much do we really want to know what God wants us to know?what God wants us to know. And if we really want to know what God wants us to know, He has a way of getting through to us. And He maintains His own time schedule for our benefit. This I most certainly believe.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"A NATION UNDER GOD"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

The name probably won't mean a thing to you, but he ought to get some kind of mention on this day -- Timothy Matlack. He was the one commissioned to do the Declaration of Independence in an engrossed copy, as they call it, the copy that you see when you visit the Library of Congress today. The copy that's there is not the one that was signed on July 4, 1776, but rather it was signed on August 2, 1776, because it took that amount of time to get ready to have another copy prepared.

Do you realize what might have happened in that interim? July 4, 1776, the spirits were high, the die was cast. There was no question about it -- there would and there should be a United States of America. But July 4, 1776 to August 2 there had been great reverses.....

...General Washington's army was out-numbered now,
one to four

...the Tories were gaining strength in many different
areas here in the colonies

.....the future did not look nearly as promising as on July 4.

John Hancock was the first to sign -- boldly he affixed his signature. According to tradition he's supposed to have said, "I sign it so that even the King of England can read it without having to reach for his spectacles." After he signed it, John Adams, so we are told, stood nearby, scanned the faces of every one of the other fifty-five who came to sign, from Josiah Bartlett to the last on that day, Abraham Clark of New Jersey. What do you suppose John Adams saw as he read the lines on their faces? Fear? Timidity?

Courage?

You see, we put halos on their heads at this distance -- we forget that they were very human. We forget that they had so much at stake. In fact, if it had not turned out the way it did, every single one of them would have lost everything, and undoubtedly his life would have been sacrificed as well. The fact remains, however, that John Adams as he stood, saw every single one of them sign the document. They were nobly intentioned men.

I am happy to bring to your attention as we read from this distance, that we say that the God-factor was dominant. They believed that what they were doing they were doing with God's favor. They also believed that they could not continue unless they could be assured of God's favor. And that leads me to announce the title for today's sermon -- the only caption that I could possibly give all that I want to say to you in the next few minutes:

"A NATION UNDER GOD"

...and there's only one text-of-texts that claims my mind and my heart as I come to this sacred desk on this particular day, the 1st verse of Psalm 127: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."

George Bernard Shaw wrote a great play about Joan of Arc, how she left her home and inspired the French people to battle against the English conquerer. In one scene young Prince Charles is complaining because Joan, obedient to her heavenly vision, has labeled him soft and cowardly. Of course he has no desire to be a hero, he wasn't made of that kind of stuff. But he did cry out to her, "I want to be just what I am. Why can't you mind your business and let me mind mine?"

...Joan of course was a fanatic, and with a zeal that becomes a fanatic she retorts to Prince Charles and says:

"Minding your own business is like minding your own body.

It is the shortest way to make yourself weak.

What is my business? Helping mother at home.

What is yours? Petting lap dogs and sucking
sugar sticks."

....and then I think I can see the fire in
her eyes when she says to him:

"I tell you, it's God's business that we're
here to do, not our own."

I don't think it's too much to suggest to you that those who signed the document called the Declaration of Independence recognized that they were about God's business, and they fervently believed that this dream was a dream in the mind and the heart of God.

Now before anything else is said, I want you to understand a thing or two.

I am perfectly aware that when I come to this place today and meet with you within these walls, that there are any number of you who come from antecedents whose blood coursing through their veins grew up in other lands and gave their loyalty to other countries. I am perfectly aware of this, for I am numbered among them.

And I thank God for what He gave my father when he was born in Lebanon, and were he living today how deeply aggrieved he'd be at what's happened to that fair and wonderful land of his.....

I am fully aware of the fact that when we come together today we come to a place that is set aside to worship one who is King above all kings and Lord above all lords and God above all gods. I am fully aware of this. But I am also fully aware of the fact that with God there is no such thing as a favorite nation.

I know we like to think that America is precious in God's sight. I know

that we sing with a great deal of fervor "God Bless America" - - and we like to believe that He does, and has, and will. I'm perfectly aware of the fact that every now and then we read from the Good Book and recite such words as these: "God be merciful unto us and bless us, and cause his face to shine upon us" I am also aware of the fact that we're not the first people to use those words. Those words were used by the Jewish people centuries before Jesus Christ, and presumably wherever the Hebrew - Christian tradition has gone. One nation after another has had people recite these words and ask God to bless them as a nation. And I have reason to believe that God has blessed them as a nation. God has only one family, and His family includes all of mankind.....and in the hollow of His hand are held all of the nations of the world.

Now having said that, on this day in particular I must bring to your attention that there was a time when, as this nation was being founded, there were those who honestly believed that God was paying some attention to them. And they allowed themselves to be sensitive to the God-factor. I must tell you again as perhaps I told you last year and the year before, that things did not go too well on one particular day when those representatives of the colonies had gathered together. There are some times when things begin to mesh and things begin to jell, like the kind of thing we experienced here on Monday, June 21, at that Congregational Meeting....for some of us it was a well-nigh spiritual experience - - it all held together beautifully. Well things don't always happen that way, and even when these representatives of the colonies had gotten together back there in 1776, they weren't all thinking alike. And yet there was so much at stake.

There was one man who hadn't spoken very much, but now all eyes seemed to turn to this man, up in his 70's, and they asked him to speak. His name: Benjamin Franklin. He rose to his feet, spoke a few words, referring to Psalm

127, the text for today's sermon, and then he continued by saying: "I have lived a long time. The longer I live the more convincing proof I see of this truth, that God governs the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His will, is it possible for an empire to rise without His notice? We have been assured in the sacred writing that except the Lord build a house, they labor in vain who build it. I firmly believe this. And I also believe that without His conquering aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel."

....this same note of recognition of the power of Almighty God, His sovereignty, was further revealed in the document, the Declaration of Independence itself. You will find this phraseology there: "We, therefore, the representatives of the United States of America, in general congress assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world, for the rectitude of our intentions . . . "

...this same recognition of the sovereignty of God is made evident in the concluding words of the document:

" . . . and for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortune, and our sacred honor . . . "

And so they did, at the very beginning, recognize the God-factor. And you and I must never, never forget it.

They were men much as we are people today. They were sinners. They were not all saints. But the fact remains, they recognized God. That fact was evident when their nation was founded so much so that I can say to you today that when you think of the Declaration of Independence -- recognize it of course as severing a political tie with the mother country. But that is not so suspect that

not to suggest that they severed their relationship with Almighty God. In a certain sense it becomes a declaration of dependence, for it has become a nation under God.

I suggest to you that you remember this, that God deals with nations as He does with individuals. He uses them for a holy purpose. They are meant to accomplish something according to His plan. I suggest that you remember that God holds nations responsible just as He holds individuals responsible. When Joan of Arc says 'We are here to do God's business' - - America must remember that she's here to do God's business. She must make God's work our work....

...and what is God's work? - - to see that the need of people is met....to see that every single person is recognized as a person, that he has certain inalienable rights that cannot be ignored!

...what is God's business? - - to see that the people of all mankind have a respect for the basic principles of truth, and justice, and love. As God gave to one people at one time so that it may be passed on to all the people on the face of the earth a set of Commandments, so God expects all people to live by those Commandments . . .

...what is God's business? - - to see that decency and truth and justice and love -- these things prevail.

And only as America gives herself to these things will God allow her to prosper.

In that day they were dependent upon God. They tried to believe that what they were doing was right in His sight. They were dependent upon Him and His wisdom. I rise to ask on this occasion - - if the Declaration of Independence were being drafted today, would we introduce into it this God-factor, even as

they did? Would we permit ourselves to say again and again and again: "Unless we remember God, what we do will be in vain"? For twenty years I have come to this sacred desk, and by this time you know my manner and mood. I am not a cynic. If I were to give a label to myself I'd label myself a "brooding optimist" - - - an optimist because I believe incurably in the fact that God's purposes will prevail. But when I look horizontally and put my finger upon the pulsebeat of contemporary man, I brood very earnestly. I am not so sure, honestly - - I am not so sure that in 1976 we could give ourselves as wholeheartedly to the God-factor as they did. I'm not so sure. I'd like to believe it. But you see, there are little things that leave tell-tale tracks. Let me give you a very simple one.

I journeyed to the northern part of Pennsylvania on Friday of this past week to witness the first performance of Tent Troupe on its way. They had a grand group come in the afternoon for the matinee that was especially designed for children. The tent very comfortably accommodated a large number of children. And one of the things that they do in the matinee is to present a very simple play. In this play there's a character who is an old woman...age has caught up with her, she can't see very well, and she needs to have somebody come and help with the housework....and she's forever at the mercy of the new hand that will come to help, and she's forever troubled by the fact that they may find her money, which she hides in the back in the chimney....

...well two of them come.....two of them find the money, and off they go with it. A third one is hired as a servant - - - and here is the audience now, they see this taking place - - but this one's a bit different. She finds the money, she holds it in her hand, and then she says to the audience of boys and girls: "What should I do with it? -- what should I do with it?".....not a single youngster said, "Put it

back!".....but a chorus of voices rises and says: "Run with it!

-- Go with it!"

Is this the way we're fashioning a new generation of Americans?

Every sermon that's preached to an extent is autobiographical. Whatever sense I have of what's right and wrong to a large degree I've gotten from my godly mother. I remember as a kid coming home one night with a handful of pennies, maybe 8 or 10. Milk in those days sold for ten cents a quart.... the milkman delivered it in bottles. You always put the bottle out the next day for the milkman to come and take it, and they he'd leave you a fresh-filled bottle in the morning. Carlton Bennett's grandmother had put the ten pennies out in the box. The temptation was too great for me....I came home with those pennies. My mother, such as your mother, of course, recognized the fact that I had some money that didn't belong to me. She knew that nobody had given it to me, she had reason to believe that. She also knew that I couldn't have earned it. So they probed....

...the truth came out. As long as God
gives me memory I'll hear ringing in my ears her words: "Take
it back -- it's not yours."

I'm not a cynic. I brood, however. I am not so sure that there are enough mothers left like my mother, in America. You see, they're not all such as you!.....

"Get what you can....get while the getting's good!

...do the expedient thing!....don't worry much about

whether it's right or wrong -- just don't get caught! . . . "

I brood about these things. Unless the Lord builds the house, it's not going to last very long. Well, why don't you finish this sermon for yourself . . .

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

July
~~September~~ 11, 1976

"ON BEING AFRAID"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Mark 4:40

Whatever a man may be at ten o'clock in the morning, or at three o'clock in the afternoon, I suggest to you that he is more so at eleven o'clock at night, and I'll tell you why I say that. For one assumes that come the approaching midnight hour, most of us would have crawled into our beds, and left alone at that point in time, either fear or faith overtakes us.

...if we have been fearful in the course of the day, we'll be even more fearful when we go to bed....if we've exercised a measure of faith during the day, we'll lie down to peaceful slumber, unafraid....

,...when it comes time to go to bed at night, either fear or faith takes over. This I most certainly believe.

H. G. Wells, bless his soul, reflected in this vein and lamented:

"As night goes round the earth, always there are hundreds of thousands of people who should be sleeping. They are lying awake in their beds. They are fearing a competition... they are dreading the fact that they might not be able to make good....they are ill of some illness they cannot comprehend....they are distressed by some irrational quarrel.... ...they are maddened by some thwarted instinct or some suppressed and thwarted desire . . . "

So I suggest to you that man is by nature a fearful creature, and there's no end to their fears.

Yet when we begin life, didn't they tell us in school that we begin with at least two instinctive fears? A child is afraid of falling -- that's why we always hold a child this way, you see, as an infant, giving that supportive touch, for a child is born with a fear of being dropped....

....a child is also afraid of a loud noise. That's why some of us in the presence of infants naturally talk softly, and whisper.

We have been led to believe that a child is afraid of a loud noise.... We begin the days of our years as fearful creatures, and then all along the line we acquire any number of others.

And yet God who deals with us is always telling us that we ought not to be afraid. Did it ever occur to you how frequently God is saying to us:

"Don't be afraid . . . don't be afraid . . . don't be afraid . . ."
Do you remember when the announcement came that a Son of His was to come into the world and God says, "I am going to give you a Saviour" - - and they were awestruck....and the angel said, to the shepherds of Bethlehem: "Don't be afraid".....

....do you remember how when they went to the Resurrection Garden, heavy on their hearts was the thought of a dead Christ, and the voice of the angel:

"Fear not - - He isn't here"

....simply to suggest all over again, God is still in control. God will not be defeated....

....do you remember how, when a handful of disciples were somewhat concerned about the impending death of their Lord and their Saviour, and how He called them to His side quietly and calmly and spoke to them with the utmost of confidence: "Let not your heart be troubled, and don't be afraid."

....God is always saying to us: "Don't be afraid." To those who put their trust in Him, this is His first word. But we are by nature fearful.

Now all of this is triggered by today's Gospel lesson. Do you remember it? - that 4th chapter of the Gospel according to Mark. Jesus had been with His disciples. For one reason or another they decided to cross the lake. They got in a boat. And while they were out in the water, a storm came up, just like that! They were in danger of drowning. They were greatly disturbed. But there on the ship Jesus was sound asleep! Naturally they wakened Him. And when they got Him awake they took Him to task, as much as to say, "Doesn't it trouble you at all with what's going on? Can't you see our safety is at stake? Why don't you do something? - - really now!"

...you read that passage again and that's just about the manner and the mood by which they address their Lord and Saviourbecause they did believe that He could control the wind and the waves...and here He was, sound asleep. They were panic-stricken. So Jesus Christ, awakened then, always the master of the situation, controls the wind and the waves.

But Jesus Christ is never satisfied just to perform a miracle. You've got to remember that. He's not to be remembered as a wonder-worker. But when He deals with us in whatever our situation may be, He immediately gives Himself to a greater concern, and that is the nature of our predicament. He discovered that they were fearful. And so He raises two questions, and the text really that I'm about to read to you now, the 4th chapter, the 40th verse:

"And Jesus said to them, Why are you fearful?

Why do you have so little faith?"

The text basically is a case study in two questions, where the second question becomes the answer to the first question! Why are you afraid?

Why don't you have faith?

Someone has observed that perhaps the universal passion of men is fear. It may be hard for you to believe, but there are some people, I think, who are incapable of loving. Not everyone has a loving temperament or disposition. I'm sorry to have to tell you that.

I'm equally happy to tell you that there are some people who can't possibly hate. We think of them and we always think of them kindly and warmly. They seem to be incapable of having a dislike for anybody.

And while there may be some people who can't hate, and while there may be some people who can't love, there isn't anyone, so it would seem, who doesn't at one time or another become afraid.

Victor Hugo wrote a trilogy, as you may remember. He recognized man's fear of nature and wrote "The Terrors of The Sea"....he recognized man's fear in society, and he wrote "Les Miserables"....he recognized man's fear of God, and he wrote "Notre Dame de Paris." I suggest to you that each of us has his own trilogy of fear, and each of us can write his own book. There are some, as I have told you before, who are afraid of the past. They look back and they remember, and they are haunted by the thought that maybe somebody else will look back and remember, because we can be very cruel, you know. We have a way of imprisoning some people in the past...we remember their act of indiscretion, somebody whispered it to us if we didn't find it out for ourselves -- an act of stupidity, an act of folly -- it happened. And there are those who are always afraid that somebody else will find out. As the years have come and gone they've responded to God's grace. They've become better, they're stronger and nobler, because of some sinful thing in another year.....but then there are always other people who can never have done with somebody else's past.

And we Christians sometimes must be very much ashamed of ourselves because we have a way of imprisoning people in their past. And when we do that we never give God enough credit for allowing His grace to become operative in their lives. People can change. And not always for the worst. What makes life worth living is the fact that they can change, change for the better. But some people are afraid that others may not deal that graciously with them. And they're afraid of the past. It has a way of catching up to them. And yet I must say to you with all the strength that I can command, and don't you dare forget it -- every saint has his past, and every sinner has his future -- thanks to the grace of God.

In the second of his trilogy of fears that each one of us can write for himself is the fear, not simply of the past, but the fear of the present. It's so inescapable! And you and I become locked in to the agenda of life which is labeled today. It's today at 10:00 o'clock that I have to make that decisionit's today at 11:00 o'clock that I have to meet that man that I have been trying to avoid, and the confrontation is going to take place -- today. It's so inescapable. And there are some people who get up in the morning afraid of what the day will bring because they know what's on the agenda, and they seem so terribly, so grossly inadequate to meet it. The past, that's over. The future -- it hasn't yet come. But today.

In our trilogy of fears as each man writes his own book, there is the fear of the future. Who knows what it may bring? And when we look at the record of other people we say to ourselves, it could be our record, too. And we become crippled by it. For a number of years when I would fill out an application form, that medical form for life insurance, I'd know a measure of delight in checking off all the things I never had. Then the last time I filled out one of those forms it suddenly occurred to me that all the things I hadn't gotten I could still yet get! Just because it hasn't happened is no guarantee it

won't occur. My heart goes out to people who find themselves increasingly troubled by a lack of peripheral vision. My sympathy was there completely when the other day, driving up Colesville Road and veering off to Franklin, suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, that car came right by me. I hadn't seen it before. And when I regained a measure of composure I thought to myself, how many more near-misses before it happens? It could, you see. It happens to other people. It could happen to me.

My heart goes out to the man in business who reads in the journal about an acquaintance of his who had had a partnership. They had had the partnership for a quarter of a century, and then one morning he discovers that he's had a partnership with a scoundrel. Now at that stage in life when he had been looking forward to retirement years, he finds himself with nothing but losses on his hands, and he has to make good. It happened in that partnership - - what guarantee do I have in the future that it couldn't happen to me?, reasons his friend and acquaintance.

....within our circle thwithin their circle they happen to know somebody who has been married 34 years. Suddenly he decides he doesn't want to live with her any longer -- or vice versa. Then she says to herself, that's the sister of the woman who left, Will Charlie divorce me when we have an empty nest?

....so they become afraid of what could happen.....

....Aunt Nellie, she never had a sick day in her life....one morning she feels a lump under the left breast...she goes to the physician and from the physician to the surgeon...he discovers others in his examination. The prognosis is not good, he gives her three-to-four months. He's right, she dies within fourteen weeks. Her sister reasons within herself, if it

happened to Nellie, could it happen to me?
...one faces the future, you see, fearfully.

When you and I face the future fearfully we are crippled. For whatever else fear is, it's the greatcrippler. It taps our resources and makes us weak. Jesus Christ is always saying to us, "You don't have to be afraid because while I may not be able to control your situation, I can have something to deal with as far as your predicament is concerned." A man's predicament is always what he does with these things that affect him. You and I may not be able to control the things that come our way, but we can control the way we handle them. If you can't take my word for it, I wish I could parade in front of you now the witness of people that I've known who have told me the terrible things they have had to face in life, but they've faced them not in their own resources but as they've drawn upon the strength of God. This is why Jesus Christ says, "I will not leave you.".....this is why Jesus Christ says, "I will not forsake you.".....this is why Jesus Christ says, "I will always be with you." This is why the Psalmist, centuries before Jesus Christ, could write as the first line of that unforgettable Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." There is such a thing as Providence -- a God who provides, come wind or weather.

I shall not fault any man for being afraid. We are by nature fearful. But with all the grace and strength I can command I am in duty bound to remind you, God says, "Bring your fearfulness to me and let me speak to your predicament lest you become crippled."

There's an old legend that I must tell you in case you haven't heard it before -- a legend, now. It goes back year upon year, in Asia Minor. A peasant is riding in his cart toward Constantinople...and as he's riding toward Constantinople he sees a hooded figure....he discovers it to be a woman by the side of the road...he invites her to sit on the seat alongside of him as they

trudge along to Constantinople. He's intrigued and fascinated by this creature and he looks at her and says, "Who are you?"

...now I should also tell you that in recent weeks there had been the dread cholera in that section of the world, and he said to her, "Who are you?"...and she said, "I am the dread cholera."

....instinctively he wants to push her off the seat, get rid of her. She stays his hand, and she says, "Please take me to Constantinople." "Why should I take you to Constantinople, if you are the dread cholera?" And she said, "If you take me there, I promise you I will kill only five people." He compromises, he takes her to Constantinople, but she says, "I will keep my promise, and as a surety here is this dagger -- I take it from my hand and give it to you -- it's the only weapon in the world that can kill me. If when you and I meet in Constantinople I have not kept my promise -- I promise you I will kill only five people -- if I've not kept that promise, then you can kill me."

...they continue on their way, they arrive in Constantinople. Three days later he discovers that five hundred people have died of cholera, that was the report. He does of course what you would have done -- he goes looking for this creature...he finds her....he raises the dagger, about to kill her. Once more she grips his hand and she says, "But I kept my promise! I killed only five -- fear killed all the rest!"

Fear is the great crippler. We who believe are fortunate. There is one who said, "You don't have to be afraid". The most precious of all things is this: stained by original sin, afraid that we're consigned to hell, God gives us our Saviour, our Redeemer, and says to those who believe: "Don't be afraid, even of your sin. I'll wash it away by the blood of the Lamb." This I most certainly believe.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"TO LIVE PEACEABLY"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Let me begin this sermon by asking you to do something for yourself. You needn't stand up, you don't have to speak aloud, you don't have to identify anybody by name. But for yourself, now, this exercise: Think of somebody that you know who is a very, very good person, no question about it. Think of someone you know who is a very good person.....

....now think of that same person as one who happens, on occasion, to make life difficult for you. Good people, you know, can do that to one another. That's why the little boy who was heard saying his prayers at night, "Dear God, make all the bad people good - - Dear God, make all the good people nice!"

Good people can't always be as nice as they ought to be, just because good people happen to be human. And just because we happen to be human we can get on one another's nerves, we can irritate each other, we can give people a hard time. Honestly we can. That's why it was no surprise for me, when as I was reading my Bible I came upon this text, the 18th verse of the 12th chapter of a letter that Paul wrote to a group of Christians who lived in the imperial city of Rome - - - I say to you, it's no great surprise to me. Realistically I understand full well that he was writing to Christians....

....I know full well that he was writing to people who claimed

Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour...

....I know very well that he was writing to people who said they

wanted to exemplify in their own lives the spirit of

Jesus Christ...

I know that he was writing to people such of this caliber. But I also know that when he wrote he said,

"If possible, as far as it depends on you,
live peaceably with all."

You get it, don't you? Even the Apostle Paul had to admonish Christians that they ought to master the art of getting along well with one another. One is brought up a bit short at the introduction: "If possible" - - does that imply that one just can't get along with some people? that some folks can make it so difficult for them? Well relax, my friend, don't misunderstand me -- I've had a perfectly good week with you. None of you in Saint Luke has given me a hard time this past week - - - I'm not speaking to you out of frustration. I'm speaking to you as a student of the Scriptures, a lover of the Word, a follower of Jesus Christ, one called to be the shepherd, the bishop of your souls, one constrained to offer a godly admonition.

One of the high values that we place upon this congregation by some of us is the realization that God has given us, in our relationship with one another, a measure of Heaven. There are people who refer to Saint Luke Church as a Family in God, where people do get along together. But this is not always true of every Christian congregation. I had a colleague who served a parish once, and the name of that congregation was "All Saints" -- All Saints Church. He was there only six months until he said, "I think I'll re-name the church -- 'All Saints-But One'"

Now no matter where you may go, no matter what your course may be eventually, you run across that one person who has a way of giving you a difficult time. And it can happen within the Christian family, it can happen within your household...it can happen where you work....it can happen in your carpool....it can happen in your neighborhood. Does the Christian church have anything to say, is there a Christian perspective? Of course there is. And that's why the text

commands attention. Says the Apostle Paul: "If possible "

Realistically speaking now, sometimes maybe we just can't quite resolve it. Maybe that's why some people move away from where they've lived. Maybe that's why some people feel constrained to change jobs -- they just can't quite hassle it, they can't cope with it. "If possible - - " says the Apostle Paul, but when he says, "If possible -- " he's always saying, keep in mind, the ideal to live peaceably with all men. This is the ideal: learn to get along with one another. As Benjamin Franklin said at the Constituting Convention, when those colonies were being fashioned into a state, "If we don't learn to get along with one another, they surely we'll hang separately."

We are meant to get along with one another. It may take a bit of doing, it may take a bit of striving, and always by the help of the Holy Spirit, don't forget that. "If possible, as far as it depends on you - - " - - now underline that part of the text: "as far as it depends on you." A Christian is always meant to be a peace-maker, a Christian is always meant to be a reconciling agent. A Christian is meant to be one who examines himself and says, what can I do to contribute peace and harmony? How can I make myself less a part of the problem and become part of the answer by way of which this can be resolved?

I know very well, of course you do too, that you may not be responsible for the way people may respond or react to what you are, but in the sight of God we are responsible to Him to strive after peace. And if Christians cannot do it, then where on the face of this earth can it happen?

Jean Paul Sarte, the Frenchman, wrote a play called "No Exit" - - and you may remember one of his very, very provocative lines, as he thought of people and became involved in his relationship with them, they were always getting in his way and always demanding things, he said: "Hell is other people!" If only they weren't there. They're the ones who make it difficult. But other people are there, and you and I must live with them. We're not meant to be

hurt, we're not meant to separate ourselves from humanity. It becomes the Christian to get along.

I once had a friend, a very good friend, school-teacher rather, maybe he shouldn't have been a school-teacher, because he loved school when the kids weren't there! They caused him so much trouble....

....I once heard about a preacher who said he had a dream of an ideal parish which offered him an ideal church structure....he had his study and he had an enclosed passageway that led directly from his study to the pulpit. He wouldn't have to traffic with people in the meantime, he wouldn't have to deal with them at all. What he didn't realize was that he'd be terribly ineffective in the pulpit if that ideal were to come true, because he'd become a better servant of the Lord and a more effective preacher only as he has relationships with people....

" If possible - - " said the Apostle Paul, - - "as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all - - - "

Do you mind if I suggest a series of guidelines for you? They could hold you in good stead, even as I try to remember them:

- - One, begin with the premise that life on occasion can be difficult, and that you can meet people who will give you a hard time -- begin with that premise. I know some folks who never quite seem to cope with life, because they've never accepted the fact that some people could make it difficult for them. And then when all of a sudden they've had to deal with tension, they collapse. Well, why don't we begin with the premise that eventually we may have to deal with some difficulty, and with a difficulty that's created by a person, or persons, who are instrumental in making the situation as bad as it is. Let's begin with that premise.

Secondly, let's try to remember what our objective is as Christians. Our objective as a Christian must always be to introduce the ingredient of peace and good-will. What is the motivation of a Christian as he faces people? It's the motivation of love. God so loved us that He gave Himself. We, then, as Christians in this world are meant to be motivated by love. And what is it to love except this: to love is to meet the need in another person's life, and sometimes that person becomes endangered....sometimes that person who gives us a very difficult time is simply sending up signals of a need that has to be met in that life. Which means for us, then, that we ought to be prepared, despite the difficulty of the situation, to meet that person's need if at all possible. Says the Apostle Paul, keep that objective in mind -- not to have hostility built upon hostility, but to have hostility lessened, eventually to evaporate, to be done away with. And love is the only thing that can conquer it.

Another guideline, if you don't mind: when you are confronted by the person who gives you a difficult time, and if that could be in the form of criticism -- most of us feel people make it difficult for us when they begin to criticize, take us to task.....let me give you some curt advice: the first thing that one ought to do, and I try to remember it myself -- not easily -- but the first thing that you ought to do in the face of it: cool it! Try to keep yourself calm. And in doing so you may discover that the strategy that needs to be employed immediately is either to keep quiet, or to speak up. And you never quite know which it is if you don't cool it. Honestly now. I speak out of bitter experience. I paid a price in trying to remember it, and I'm still in the learning process. When somebody makes it difficult for you, by the grace of God, try to play it cool. And then maybe you'll discover that you ought to keep quiet, because there could be a element of truth in what's being said, and if there is, then you and I are in duty bound to recognize it, not to

deny it and not to defend it if evil is stamped on it. And we discover that only as we play it cool.

On the other hand, one may discover, as he keeps himself quiet and calm, that what he has to deal with now is the personification of evil itself. And if this should be true, then it ought to be nipped, and nipped immediately. And you speak to that end.

I myself, and I bear testimony to this, wish that I would have followed this advice on occasion. I could have saved myself a lot of seemingly endless grief, if immediately the truth could have been spoken. And truth can be its own defense. But this can be made plain to you only if you play it cool, if you don't lose your head, if you don't respond irrationally.

Now it takes a bit of doing to accomplish this, of course it does. But one must also remember -- there's another guideline, perhaps this is Number One: a man must always remember who he is. I am a child of God and as a child of God I do not always behave as I ought to behave. It's wonderful basic Lutheran theology that you and I, who are being saved, are still sinners. We are not perfect people.

I once found myself in a very difficult spot, and I don't enjoy it, of having to criticize a person and take that person to task. And her immediate defense was: "Well nobody's perfect" -- and by saying that she excused herself. I'm suggesting to you that if one can be as charitable with himself, then he ought to be just as charitable with somebody else -- if I'm not perfect, that person, too, is not perfect.

Well one of our besetting sins is, while we excuse ourselves from perfection, we have a way of expecting perfection from somebody else. Some of us as parents have learned that too late. We simply demanded entirely too much at a particular time in a youngster's life.

And we Christians have to be very careful when we deal with one another.

And we Christians have to be very careful when we deal with one another. There is such a thing as a growing Christian, there is such a thing as an emerging spirit. Please, let me tell it to you again with all the charity and the candor that I can muster: all of us are at different levels in our spiritual maturation. Just because we happen to be a certain chronological age, it doesn't follow that we've all matured emotionally and spiritually to that level. Some folks at 60 are still adolescent emotionally. They've never gotten beyond the infant stage emotionally. Honestly now, and we have to remember that. And all of us are in the process of becoming better, and we have to make allowances for that. I like the plaque that somebody has -- where did I read it? - - - "Be patient with me -- God isn't finished with me yet." We need to remember this. Says the Apostle Paul, live peaceably, as far as it depends on you - - live peaceably with people. This is the Christian ideal. Strive after it. Make it your objective.

I thank God again and again for those of you in this congregation who place as your heart's desire that Saint Luke should become a family of God where we are at peace with one another, because each of us claims that measure of pardon which comes from Jesus Christ. I, as a sinner, deal with you, as a sinner.....that's the way we are in God's sight.

But now for whatever it may be worth, let me shift gears for the minute and give you some very earthy advice. Occasionally some unfair attack will be made upon your reputation and character. There was once a man who read in the newspaper something that he knew to be untrue. He recognized the wisdom of a 19th century statesman, Edward Everett, and so when the newspaper had published false and misleading accounts concerning him, he went to his friend Everett to inquire as to what action he would recommend: "What should I do?" This can happen, you know. Everett said, "My dear sir, you do nothing. Half the people who buy that paper never saw the article about you....half the people who did

see it failed to read it.....half of those who did read it failed to understand it.....half of those who understood it know you and refuse to believe what they've read.....now half of those who did believe were people of no consequence anyway." Well that might be helpful on occasion.

Abraham Lincoln once said that if he had to answer all the people who criticized, then, he said, I wouldn't have much time to do anything else. Well maybe this is a lesson that you and I have yet to master, how we need to get along with those who make life difficult for us -- good as they may be --maybe my prayer ought to be, and your prayer ought to be:

"Dear God, bad as I am, make me good.

Dear God, good as I may become, don't ever let

me forget that I ought to be nice as well . . ."

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"NOW NEVER COMES AGAIN"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

In the time that remains, allow me to think with you very quickly upon a sermon bearing the title: "Now Never Comes Again." The text, the 25th verse of the 24th chapter of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles:

"But when the discourse turned to questions of morals, self-control and the coming judgment, Felix became alarmed and exclaimed, That will do for the present. When I find it convenient I will send for you again."

Well this is the situation. The preacher's name was Paul. He made his living by mending tents. But no matter where he went, he always made an opportunity to witness to Jesus Christ. Every now and then it would get him into trouble. This time the authorities issued an order because of his preaching that they would have to hail him before the governor, a Procurator by the name of Felix, who lived in Caesarea.

Now when they brought him to Felix, a very interesting thing happened -- the judge became very much interested in the man who was brought before him, and he gave him a chance to speak. And Paul, every inch the preacher that he was, exploited the opportunity and went to town. He got along swimmingly. And then all of a sudden, when the Procurator heard him talk about morals and self-control and the coming judgment -- he said, "That's enough." He turned the preacher off. And he said, some other time we'll talk about this.

It's a matter of record. What a pity! Here in front of him was a man who had this tremendous experience of Jesus Christ. No second-hand experience. He was able to say, "I know this to be true because it happened to me." And

then he was able to build upon that experience. You just don't find a person like that every day. In fact, he was the greatest preacher of all time, this man Paul. And Felix cut him off. Listened to him for a while, but then said, "That's enough for a while. Some other time we'll talk about it."

The title for this brief sermon is "Now Never Comes Again." As I read my Bible I discover that Felix had Paul imprisoned for two years. And within that two-year period while Felix remained Procurator, he never got around to getting Paul to come to him and saying, "Paul, let's go back and begin all over again -- tell me some more about what you were telling me." Felix never got around to it.

He had his chance. He had his present moment. He could have gone on listening. He could have made his decision for Jesus Christ. But he didn't. He put it off. The time never again came when he could have done it. He never made time for it.

You're right, my friend. I want to talk to you about procrastination. Every single one of us is guilty of it -- putting off -- saying, some other time. Oh, we rationalize, of course we do, and we say it's the thing to do, make haste slowly: be deliberate -- take time to reflect -- don't lock yourself into a situation that becomes irrevocable -- let things run their course -- don't you make the decision that's going to affect your life -- let other people do it for you, that way you don't have to assume the responsibility.oh, there are all kinds of voices coming at us, you see, to provide us the seemingly luxury of putting off -- don't act now -- wait until tomorrow!

Well tomorrow is a perfectly good word, it's a precious word. Some of us look at our children and when we look at them we think in terms of tomorrow.....some of us in our relationship to our work always plan as we think of tomorrow. Don't rule tomorrow out. But remember this and remember it well, my friend, that tomorrow is always fashioned out of the things of today! Tomorrow depends on what you do now. So now must always be seen in relation-

ship to tomorrow, because tomorrow does come. And when it comes it's determined very largely by what you've done in the present moment.

Felix had a chance to decide for Jesus Christ. He had a chance to come out strongly in favor of what the preacher was saying, but he put it off. He never got around to making the decision.

Let me tell you this about time....you've probably reflected upon it. You can lose it. You can never find it. The thing about time is that you make it (if I may use that figure of speech) -- you make time for things. Every single one of us has the same amount of time as far as the 24-hour period is concerned. You have no more nor less than I have.....I have no more nor less than you have. But a surprising thing happens, though. Some of you are able to do with it far more than I can do with it, because you have a way of making it do, you have a way of making the time count for something.

Now when you come to this whole business of making time count, we've got to realize that it's a matter of priority. We're always using time, we're always spending time, but some of us spend it for things that are far more important than others. Some of us spend it for things that are less important than others. Felix had time, alright, and he was using it, he was spending it. But he never got around to spending it for the things that mattered most, the opportunity which was given to him to have a relationship with Jesus Christ. And that time was made available to him then and there, but he said, "Later on" - - - which he never got around to.

My brother-in-law began his ministry as assistant preacher at the Baptist church in Roxbury, a part of Boston, as you know. He served with a very unusual man whose motivation in life was never to allow himself to go to bed on a Sunday night without being able to say, "Well, Lord, we got another convert for you." So he took a measure of pride in saying that he had a baptism in that church every Sunday of the year. While I never heard him preach,

I can imagine him going to the sacred desk and preaching a sermon, and then giving the invitation and saying, "Is there anybody here right now who would like to give his life to Jesus Christ? If so, come forward -- make the decision now." He was right in putting it that way. For even Scripture maintains, Now is the acceptable time -- now is the day of salvation.

As I read Scripture I am also impressed with the fact that when our Blessed Lord was calling His disciples, there's a passage of Scripture that says when He came to Andrew and Peter -- "They straightway left what they were doing and followed him" - - - then and there they followed Him, followed the noble impulse. Whenever you're laid hold upon by a noble impulse, follow through. That's why God gives it to you. Make the most of it! Don't delay, for the Devil has his own way of discouraging you later on.

You know by this time that I've always placed a high value upon ministry to young people. I began my own ministry in that way, because I'm firmly convinced that you cannot do for someone at twenty-two what you should have done at sixteen.....and you can't give a person at sixteen what he should have had when he was ten years of age. You can't go back. What needs to be done needs to be done now, in the present moment. That's why one of God's most precious gifts to us is time -- next to the gift of pardon, the most wonderful thing that He gives us is the present moment. My soul is fairly on tiptoe when I conduct the liturgy of the Church and declare the Absolution: "The Almighty and Merciful God grant unto you, being penitent, pardon and remission of all your sins, time for amendment of life . . . " What is each moment that's given to you except a chance right now to provide a corrective to what went wrong yesterday, or to provide a measure of improvement to what you have already been able to build upon? Poor Felix, he had it right there within grasp. He put it off. He never again got around to it.

I am wondering if you'll allow me a very personal reference now that comes out of the fabric of our relationship together here at Saint Luke. Two years ago we added to our staff our first Resident Buildings and Grounds Superintendent, Earl Webster Conn, a man who brought to us extraordinary gifts, a man who in the sunset years of his life asked for only one thing from God and that was the chance to serve his Lord by taking good care of this property. A few weeks ago we conducted his burial service here at Saine Luke, and when I came to this sacred desk on that day I took as the title for my brief sermon: "A Man To Remember." For that's exactly what he was. He asked for hardly any remuneration, in fact we simply gave him a token and a place for him and his Mary to live. But he found great joy in loving and serving.

A year ago next month he and a teenager and I drove to the hills of home. And as we traveled along those 200 miles it seemed as though he talked incessantly as he recited for my teenage friend episode after episode in his life as a railroader. He introduced to the life of this teenager a chapter that he could never know for himself. He told how he was part of a wrecking crew, and how they'd have to go out and spend hour after hour and almost day after day so that the trains could start moving again over the tracks. He spoke about going down into a pit and bringing back the body of a man who had died through a fall. Earl Conn was a man of seven lives himself. I said to myself as I listened to him, when we get back, I'm going to ask Timothy, the older son of our other Pastor, to get together his tape recorder and to go over and sit at the feet of Earl Conn and to get this all down on tape.Timothy's father had done that for me once. Timothy's father, as a teenager, the very first year we were here at Saint Luke, the second year, went back to Williamsport, took a tape recorder and put on tape a recital by my

father as an immigrant . . . how it took three weeks to cross the Atlantic
....how at eighteen years of age he said goodbye to his homeland, never to
return, and how he made his way here to America....how he landed here on
Ellis Island. A priceless thing. I have it.

But as far as Timothy and I are concerned, I never got around to
getting Timothy to doing it. I kept putting it off - - the weeks, the months
passed into a year. And now it's gone forever. A most remarkable chapter
that could have been recorded.....now -- never comes again.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"ON GETTING ALONG WITH YOURSELF"
(Genesis 32:24)

NO MATTER how diligent the effort, O God, that's been expended in the preparation of this sermon, it is only as the listener and the preacher together are laid hold upon by the Holy Spirit and made receptive to the truth that we can better understand what's being offered. To that end, O God, give us that blessing now. Through Jesus Christ Thy Son our Lord, who when He came, came preaching. Amen.

The title for today's sermon is simply this: "On Getting Along With Yourself." And the text is from the 32nd chapter of the Book of Genesis, and the 24th verse:

"And Jacob was left alone, and there
wrestled a man with him unto the
breaking of the day . . . "

Tell me now, who is it that causes you more trouble in this world than anybody else? Momentarily you may think in terms of other people, you may see a particular face, you may hear a particular voice. And you may say, it's that person - - if it were not for that person my life would be as a breeze.

I have news for you, my friend. You're not telling the whole story. For the person in this world who may cause you more trouble than anybody else may be yourself. In the final analysis, this is what some of us honestly admit. We pay perfectly good money to take courses that will help us to get along with other people, but if we'd only admit to ourselves that the trouble of troubles is this: we've never really learned how to get along with ourselves.

I frankly confess to you that I have my moments of despair, not because of anything that any of you or anyone else has ever caused me, but because I haven't yet come to terms with myself or resolved a particular battle that's waging within my own soul. As is true so often, every sermon that's preached -- one may put it that way -- becomes biographical, and every preacher speaks out of the experience of his own soul. That is why I can say to you that the person perhaps that causes each of us more problems than anybody else is himself.....yourself.

That's why I read with more than ordinary interest the 32nd chapter of the Book of Genesis. Maybe you'll be interested in knowing that every couple of years I reach for the Bible as though I hadn't reached for it before, and I read it from cover to cover, all over again. I am in the process of doing that right now. A few weeks ago I began with the Book of Genesis . . I'll wade my way all through the Scriptures, cover to cover, taking my time, however, laboring through those chapters of Genesis. And as you might surmise, I'm dealing now with that rascal, Jacob.

Call him by name, that's exactly what he was! And I'm discovering all over again how many rascals there are in the Bible. I surely hope that when our Sunday School teachers tell the lesson in Sunday School, that they handle them very circumspectly, that they surely don't hold some of these characters as good examples. Jacob is one that has to be dealt with very carefully -- he has a very seamy side to his life. And there's a reason for it, of course. He had a mother who was a contriver....she was a manipulator, and he was victimized by her influence. You know that as you read about Jacob.

It's absolutely amazing sometimes to go back and read for yourself all

over again some of his diabolical tricks. Well now, as far as the 32nd chapter is concerned, they're catching up with him. You know that, don't you? Life has a way of catching up with every one of us. The rascal that a man is, well he can't go on forever that way. Eventually he finds himself alone, and then all that he is and all that he has been and all that he'd like to be is paraded in front of him. So in this 32nd chapter of Genesis you have Jacob now, very uneasy, very uncomfortable, for tomorrow he's going to meet a man that he hasn't seen for two decades -- his own brother.

He had defrauded him, he'd played all kinds of tricks. Now realizing how ugly their meeting could be, he reaches for his bag of tricks for still another, and he sends one contingent after another as an advance company to meet Esau, to bear gifts and to make some kind of appeasement...

...and he's also heard that his brother is going to come toward him with quite an array of forces...and this makes him very uncomfortable. And so very cleverly he divides his own camp into two sections, so that his brother can attack him from only one side, and if that should take place, then the other side could escape and Jacob won't lose everything completely....
....ah, a very clever chap! He's worked all of this out. But he's not so sure how it's going to come off. And he's left alone, that's the way the Bible has it: "And Jacob was left alone."

And he couldn't sleep....and you know exactly why. There's a parade of people going back in front of him, he's not just one person. He has many sides to his personality, just as you and I have many sides to our personality.

And that's part of the problem that we have, you see -- we're never quite certain just which one of us is going to come out in the ascendency. You show one face maybe on a Sunday morning - - - you may show another face five hours from now, especially if you may have to encounter an unfriendly neighbor or deal with a rebellious youth -- another side of your nature can come out.

You know how highly I esteem our good friend of the parish, fellow member Ethel Anderson. I recall a conversation that I had with Ethel several years ago. We were talking about a certain member of this congregation, and Ethel paid her what I think is a very beautiful tribute. She said, "She seems to be very comfortable with herself." You can't say that about everyone, and many of us can't say it about ourselves. We are not at ease with ourselves, we are not fully integrated. For some of us there is a constant waging of civil war inside us -- various forces and tendencies at work. Well, all Hell was let lose in Jacob's soul that night, as he was left alone.

I don't have to tell you that that's one reason why some people don't want to be left alone, because then they have nobody on their hands but themselves. A few weeks ago they laid to rest in Gettysburg my mentor during my days in the seminary, my Professor in Church History who later became the President of the Seminary, Dr. Abdel Ross Wentz. And naturally when I thought about the end of his life I looked back and recalled my relationship with him on more than one occasion, particularly those three years spent at Seminary. And my mind zeroed in on one incident in particular, when in a free-wheeling kind of conversation with some of us he said, "I'm going to give you a rather unconventional definition of Hell. I'll tell you what Hell is," said the eminent theologian: Hell is having nobody on your hands but yourself."

Well, theologically speaking, maybe that's acceptable. Because Hell is being separated from God. For if Heaven is where God is, then Hell is where we separate ourselves from God, and where we separate ourselves from people who love us, people that we're meant to love - - - to have nobody on our hands but ourselves. Some people just can't bear it, they can't stand it. But it was a night that almost wrecked the soul of Jacob -- would you be surprised if I were to tell you - - - and well it should have! I'm to be numbered among those who honestly believe that every now and then a man ought to stay awake at night, every now and then a man ought to have to face: himself. He can only run so far.

In Jacob's case, I can tell you this, it was worth it, because of the way it came out. And that's why I can say to you, occasionally you and I ought to have a sleepless night in which we deal with ourselves and ourselves alone, of course in our relationship to God and against the background of our relationship with other people.

But part of the problem that comes to us when we deal with ourselves is that there are so many of us! Really now! You might ask yourself the question sometime: Will the real So-and-So stand up! Just who am I, honestly? And that was part of Jacob's problem. He had to find out that night who he really was.

Some time ago a member of this congregation sent me in the mail the lines that I'm about to read. He had clipped them, and I go back to my files frequently and read them. I find it highly beneficial to recall these lines. They are entitled "Four Men" - - and the author really is just talking about himself. But as he analyzes the picture he sees four people in front of him. Listen carefully . . .

"Four Men"

*It chanced upon a winter's night,
Safe sheltered from the weather,
The board was spread for only one,
Yet four men dined together.
There sat the man I meant to be,
In glory spurred and booted,
And close beside him, to the right,
The man I am reputed;
The man I think myself to be
His seat was occupying
By the man I really am,
Who to hold his own was trying.
And all beneath one roof we met,
And none called his fellow Brother --
No sign of recognition passed --
They knew not one another.*

Well, maybe that's the way it is. Who am I really? There's more than one facet to my personality.

Maybe we do well to think a bit about the fact that down deep inside every one of us there is a person we mean to be -- that if we could, this is what we would become. . . .

...but there are always the restraining influences, you see, or there is the lack of encouragement to be what we ought to be, or the lack of honest effort on our part and response to the grace of God to let it come off.....

But down deep inside of us there is the person we mean to be. If only we could become that person! And all the rest of us sometimes never really see that person until perhaps the hour of crisis or emergency arises, and then we're surprised sometimes that people did the diabolical things that they did. And maybe we could say to ourselves that down deep inside them, in the years that had come and gone, these desires had been there, but suppressed. When the moment came that they could be diabolical, they were! -- because that was the constant inclination and the desire of the soul.....

...and then sometimes we're also surprised, in the moment of crisis, how some people come off handsomely. They rise to the occasion, and you and I never thought that they could be that good! ...but down deep inside them, across the years, there was this inclination on their part to be better than they were, and then the moment came when they could become as strong and as noble as they were.

Well down deep inside of us there is the person we'd like to be, we mean to be. But deep inside each one of us there is also the person we're reputed to be. And we have to deal with that. It isn't exactly the kind of person we'd like to be but it's the kind of person other people think us to be. And that can have its effect upon us.

Some people are cabined and cringed and confined because you and I freeze them into an image. We had a certain relationship with them, and we stopped the clock at that moment - - - that's the reputation they've given us, and we can't think of them otherwise. And that's a pity, because we rule out the possible grace of God whereby their lives could improve and become better....

...but when a man sits down by himself and by himself alone, and if he's able to reflect honestly, he may have to deal with the kind of person that other people think him to be...and it may not always be complimentary.

I am also the kind of person that I think that I am. Now I can't answer that for you. It keeps me a-stepping to answer it for myself.....just as I can't look you straight in the eye and say: "This is what you believe" -- I can't look you straight in the eye and say: "This is what you think of yourself" - - - only you can give that answer. And I'm amazed sometimes at the amount of perfectly good money that's spent by people who go to analysts and psychiatrists, who when it's all said and done have spent their money simply for the person to sit there and say, "Now you put the pieces together -- we've

isolated them, we've named some of them. But now eventually you'll have to decide just who you are."

In the "Death of A Salesman" as the family gathers together at the grave of Willy Loman, one of the sons is heard to say, "What a pity -- he never really knew who he was!" Jacob found out that night who he was, not because of his own strength or resources -- because God took the initiative and God broke through! Martin Luther in the interpretation of this passage likes to think that the man who wrestled with Jacob (you know the Scriptures identify him in no other way than simply this, that "Jacob was left alone, and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day") -- Luther liked to say that was a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ....that was God breaking through into Jacob's life, God taking the initiative, God coming to Jacob...and God doing battle with him. And God bringing out the better side of him....and God giving him the courage to go on and to face his brother - - - God redeeming him.

If I were not a Christian for any other reason than this, I would embrace the Christian faith because it's always reminding me of who I am. I sometimes think there is no more precious passage of Scripture than the reference that says, "We are the sons of God" - - which is simply to suggest we have a Heavenly Father who cares for us, who loves us, who will not abandon us, who has a continuing interest in us.

So the next time you have trouble getting along with yourself, my friend, simply remind yourself that you're not orphaned in this world - - you belong to Someone who will never relax His grip on you, and who allows His angels to send their hovering wings to be above you -- Who, if only you will let Him, will guide you and direct your course in life. This I most certainly believe.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"MARY, MOTHER OF OUR LORD"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son, Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

In my study here at the church, and underneath the plate of glass that's on top of my desk, is a picture of Pope John 23rd. He's a favorite of mine. He has been a favorite of many people. And I presume he's won his way into their hearts not because he was Pope but because he was a human being whose humanity was glorified by the touch of Christ.

Allow me for a moment, if you don't mind, to indulge as I think about him, of three evidences regarding his humanity. As an example, the first Christmas that he was Pope he paid a visit to a prison in Rome, a prison that was nearest the Vatican. And when he went to see the prisoners he said, "You could not come to me, so I have come to you" - - a very human thing to do.

....it's also been reported that once he was taking some visitors around the grounds of the Vatican, and someone said to him, "How many people work here?" His Eminence replied: "

"Maybe half!" -- a very human thing to do.

....when the time came for his departure from this world, as he was about to be translated into God's nearer presence, he did not recite Scripture (as well he could have done)...he simply said, "My bags are packed." - - a very human thing to do.

This is one reason why some of us have come to love him.

This is one reason why some of us were not afraid of him. He made us less afraid of one another. And would you believe it, that this introduction, then, serves its purpose because for the first time to my knowledge, I think,

here in Saint Luke Church we're recognizing a Sunday labeled: "Mary, Mother of Our Lord Sunday." And what's happening here in Saint Luke is happening throughout Christendom, where Protestants, unafraid and without any reluctance, are talking about Mary, the mother of our Lord. Pope John 23rd, because he was human, made it easy for the rest of us to re-consider her.

I think I'm correct when I'm telling you this, that very few Lutheran churches have ever been known as St. Mary Lutheran Church. Of all the congregations that we have in the Maryland Synod, there's only one that's known by that name -- not far away, Silver Run, Maryland -- St. Mary Lutheran Church.

We come today to think about Mary. We don't call her Mary, Mother of God -- of course we don't!.....and we don't call her Mary, Queen of Heaven -- of course we don't! But we do call her Mary, Mother of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and in doing so we emphasize her humanity. She's not co-redeemershe does not sit side by side with Him in Heaven to judge us all.....she does not sit there as mediator. We recognize her as the Scriptures recognize her, the one chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Saviour. Happily, then, we come to think about her today. For too long we have been reluctant to talk about her. Forshame upon us that we've allowed the Roman Church to have a monopoly upon Mary. Mary belongs to us all, and the lessons that she would teach are lessons to be heard and to be understood by all of Christendom.

Now in the brief time that I stand before you I want to tell you three things about Mary:

(1) She was surprised that she should be chosen by God.

Oh, I ought to read the text for you. You'll recognize the words, sometimes it's referred to as "Mary's Song" - -

"Then Mary said, My heart is overflowing with praise of my Lord. My soul is full of joy in God my saviour, for He has deigned to notice me, his humble servant. And all generations to come shall call me the happiest of women. The one who can do all things has done great things for me . . . "

And you begin at that point. She was surprised and overwhelmed that of all the people on the face of the earth God should say, "Mary, I need you."

We call her the 'Chosen One' - - we call her the 'Chosen Vessel of God.' And as we reconsider and think of Mary and think of her all over again we do well to begin at that point: she was one especially chosen by God, because God had something that had to be done in a very special way. And maybe we have a right to say He needed a very special person to do it. And so He chose Mary.

I remember once being on the campus of St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, and that very marvelous spirit of a man who was in the art department and a sculptor, no less, he said to us one time as I visited there: "An artist is not a special kind of person, but each person is a special kind of artist." And when you and I think of Mary as she was particularly chosen for what God had in mind for her - - dare I suggest to you that God thinks in no less manner of you in a special way to accomplish a special purpose? As Mary was especially chosen, I make bold to say to you, she reminds us that every single one of us is also particularly chosen for a niche in life that no one else will occupy. There is no another you, and what God has in mind for you He's not assigning to somebody else....and if you don't perform it, no one else can do it - - only you can do it. In God's plan for the Incarnation, He needed Mary and He chose her especially. Well, you begin at that point: Mary, the chosen one.....Mary -- surprised that she was chosen, but accepted the fact that she was chosen.

The second thing that comes readily to mind can be the descriptive that we use for her so frequently: Mary the Virgin.....

...she was a peasant girl, but chaste. And in this day and age when we think so lightly of our sexuality, in this day and age when so much of it becomes almost a sacrilege, we do well to place a high value upon Mary and her kind -- the pure and the chaste.

I wonder sometimes if there's any evil in our day that's quite as gross as the evil of the cheapening of sexuality, the down-grading of it. I'm indebted to Donald the Archbishop of Canterbury, who made bold to speak these words in the House of Lords not too many months ago:

"To hint that it is a small thing to start a human life, or a small thing to snuff it out by abortion, to teach that abortion does little to the woman who undergoes it and that it can be done with little more effect than a tonsilectomy; to suggest that a one-parent family is much the same as a two-parent family when all evidence goes to show that a child needs the support of both mother and father; to teach that any kind of sexual activity will do, and practically any age.....to encourage or allow the publication of pornographic literature which inflames instincts which on any reckoning take some strength of character to control and discipline; to suggest that minds cannot be polluted by such stuff as easily as bodies can be infected by dirty water - - these things and like things that often go with them are the likes that damn, the fifth column that betrays our national well-being and undermines the stability of our homes."

In the day that needs to be addressed in this manner we can well afford to take a good look at Mary all over again, who placed a high value upon chastity.

The next thing that can be said about Mary is that she was faithful. I'm willing to suggest to you that Mary knew nothing at all about romance. I'm not so sure if there was much of anything called romantic love in those days. I stem from Near-Eastern stock, as you know, and even though my parents had lived several decades here in the States, they never had done

with the ways of the Old World. And if they had their way it could well have been that they would have chosen for me the girl that I would marry. But I was a child of this world and I have romantic blood coursing through my veins....

...but in those days, even as is true in India today, the bride is chosen, and the husband has little to say about it.

I'm not so sure that Mary knew much about romance. I'm absolutely certain that she knew a great deal about fidelity. And when it's all said and done, this is the thing that matters most in our relationship as husband and wife, that priceless ingredient called faithfulness.

In a day and age when we make it so easy to walk away from responsibility, we do well to go back and take another good look at Mary, the faithful one. Faithful not only to Joseph, but faithful to those entrusted to her keeping. "Family Portrait" is the name of the drama that deals with that family in Nazareth. Jesus does not appear anywhere, His face is not seen, His voice is not heard. You deal with the other characters in that family. Mary is always portrayed as one who is very reverent, and awe-struck with the fact that she was the one who cradled Jesus in her arms....and then the final glimpse that you get of her, standing at the foot of the cross, keeping the vigil -- not being able to understand, of course she couldn't understand why it had to end like that! -- she only knew she had to be there. Faithfulness doesn't reason, doesn't try to figure it out. It only accepts the fact that this is where I need to be.

I once had a friend of mine who said to me, in the days when you could make a telephone call from any pay station for a dime, he'd give the instruction to his daughter, he'd give the instruction to his son, "You always keep

a dime in your wallet, because if you ever get in trouble, no matter where you may be, you call me on the phone.....and knowing you, I think that you could get in trouble!" - - - that's the way he said to me he talked to them, and I'll give it to you absolutely in the vernacular: "It could be that sometime when you may call me I'll hate like hell the mess you've gotten into, but you call me, and I'll come, and I'll be with you.

In a day when it's so easy even for some of us to walk away from the responsibility that we owe to rebellious youth, we do well to go back and take another look at Mary, the personification of faithfulness. She was the 'Stabat Mater' - - the woman who waited, and stood there.

The last thing that I can tell you about Mary is this: she never ceased to marvel that the grace of God rested upon her. She had wonder in her eyes, I dare say, to the very day that she died - - to think that God should choose me -- to think that I should be the one to cradle in my arms the Christ-child! ...to teach Him to pray, to sing the ancient songs of Israel, to guide Him in the way of Jehovah - - - - to think that I should be that one! For every single father and mother in this day and age to whom God has given no greater responsibility than the nurture of a child we do well to go back and take a look at Mary, who never ceased to marvel that this should be a privilege. She began at that point. She never lost the sense of wonder.

And I would close this sermon by telling you that each one of us in the sight of God has received a blessing, each one of us is one on whom God has smiled. God loves you. God sent His Son into the world to die for you. God has chosen you as His own.....

...never cease to wonder.

Call it amazing, amazing grace.

* * *

"A DIET FOR THE SOUL"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Some people talk a great deal about themselves. This happens occasionally out of necessity. Jesus was one such person.

We may be surprised, as we read the Gospel record, to discover how frequently He was making some reference very specifically to Himself, because He wanted so much to have people understand exactly who He was -- why He was here, and what He was up to. Because man is as insensitive on occasion to God as he is, because man is so stained by original sin, he does not always easily see God, recognize the presence or nearness of Jesus Christ. So our Blessed Lord again and ever so often found Himself talking about Himself, because He wanted people to know exactly who He was.

In order to do that, and that man might better understand, He would use imagery or a metaphor. You recognize some of these immediately -- some of them constitute a favorite picture of yours as you think of Jesus Christ....

...He's the one, you know, who said:

"I am the vine"

...He's the one who said:

"I am the door"

...He's the one who said:

"I am the light of the world."

....and surely you like this reference that He made to himself, don't you?

...He said, "I am the good shepherd."

Today's text constitutes six words that He used in reference to Himself, and they come as a part of the Gospel for the day -- six very simple words, and I dare say you either know what they mean, or you don't know what they mean. If you do know what they mean, you can well afford to gain a new appreciation for them.....and if you don't know what they mean, as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ it's high time that you become better acquainted with them.

In that 6th chapter of the Gospel according to John, Jesus is talking about Himself, and He says very simply:

"I am the bread of life."

It's important that you understand the setting.

He had recently performed the miracle of the feeding of the multitude. They were impressed. You just don't run into somebody like this every day, a man who could guarantee food on your table! They really had found something in Him, and they wanted to make Him a king, they wanted Him around all the time....they wanted Him to supply their needs. And then He had to set the records straight. That's why He had to talk about Himself, and He said, Don't talk about the bread that I give you - - see me now as I am: "I am the bread of life."

....now He's not talking about the bread that He gives,
but He says: "I am the bread of life."

What did He mean?

That's a good question, honestly. And you can well afford to ask it.
What did He mean?

Well, let's begin where we ought to begin. What is bread? And that answer you give simply by saying bread is what's basic. We can't live without bread. I remember seeing a baby, within hours after he was born, go to his mother's breast - - from the very moment that we are born, so it seems, we crave food.....

and other things being equal, to the day that we die we'll have hunger pangs. Bread is basic. Without bread a man cannot live.

I remember some years back when I first went to Europe, the itinerary did not take me first to England, where I would have been most comfortable, of course, and there I would have had some familiarity with the language as I crossed the ocean for the first time. But when I emplaned I emplaned for Sweden. I couldn't speak a single word of Swedish. I had a friend who recognized what my predicament might be, and so she said, "I must teach you some basic Swedish."

....and what do you suppose was the first Swedish that she taught me, and I dare say the only Swedish that I know to this day: "yag är hungrig" - - "yag är törstig" " tack så mycket"

I am hungry.....I am thirsty.....thank you

No matter where you may go upon the face of the earth, the one thing that we have in common, so typical of our humanity, is the need to be sustained, the need to be nourished.

It is Shakespeare who has Shylock, in the Merchant of Venice, speak in this fashion: "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands? organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food? Hunt with the same weapons? Subject to the same diseases? Healed by the same means? Warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not have revenge? . . ." The note, of course, is struck, that common aspect of our humanity. Bread -- it's basic to all mankind. Without it we cannot live.

But Jesus Christ is not talking now about physical bread or bread that's a necessity to sustain our physical life. Man is more than body. Put it this way: he's a soul with a body, and we dare never lose sight of our eternal dimension. Man needs to be sustained spiritually. And now Jesus says, I am the one who can sustain you spiritually.

The longer I remain in the ministry the more I become conscious of the fact that there are any number of people who are suffering from malnutrition, spiritually speaking. On the street in which we lived in South Williamsport, Pennsylvania, there was a lady up at the other end near the alley. We knew her, of course we did. She lived alone, and after we moved here we were distressed to learn that they found her dead one morning in bed. We were more distressed to learn what the medical report was: she had died from malnutrition! Oh, not that she hadn't eaten. She had eaten alright, but she, living alone, had not made it her business to eat the proper kind of food essential for good physical well-being.

There are people like that spiritually. I suppose we've never had a more diet-conscious generation. Almost everywhere you go you hear people talking about their diet -- whether it's to lose weight or to gain weight . . . whether it's to correct a situation or for some other reason. It's high time that we talk about the diet of the soul, for there are those of us who suffer from spiritual malnutrition.

I don't know how you look upon your coming here each Lord's Day, but for the moment would you believe me when I tell you that you can look upon it in this manner -- that you come back here each Lord's Day to get your diet straightened out! -- to get yourself back on a proper diet, spiritually speaking. Some of us in the course of the week feed a little too much on a diet of hate -- honestly we do.....some of us in the course of the week allow ourselves the luxury of imbibing on a far-too-generous portion of ill-will. We don't always

think kindly of other people, and we don't always treat them with compassion. But we know that we are Christian, so we come back here each Lord's Day to get our diet straightened out, to get back in balance.

I see the wonders that happen sometimes when people are taken to a hospital . . . and would you believe me if I were to tell you that time and time again, more often than you may know, the experience in the hospital is just to stabilize the person as far as the diet is concerned, to make sure that their body gets the proper food.

It's always a happy experience if a person, when he eats his meal, can do it with zest. The French are perfectly right as they have the waiter bending over your shoulder and you're about to eat your meal, and he says, "bon appetit!" -- eat it with a measure of zest and enthusiasm! Have a good appetite while you eat it. I should be very happy indeed if when you crossed the threshold of this place, you came with a measure of zest for what you are about to receive. Long before the day of Jesus Christ, the Psalmist said:

"O taste and see that the Lord is good"

....what is that if it isn't a spiritual 'bon appetit' -- taste now and find out for yourself. I for one am grateful for all of you who have come to this place, who engender a spirit of good will, who provide an environment that makes it easier for other people to return and to share the spiritual fare that's offered in this place.

But now going back to that trip to the hospital . . . I'm impressed as you are, of course I am, with the gadgetry which they wheel inside the hospital room and alongside the hospital bed. For they've discovered that a patient perhaps has so deteriorated that he's lost his appetite. So what do they do next? They force-feed! -- and by injection, you see, they provide the basic ingredients.

Well, we can't do that spiritually. There's no way in God's name that I

can force-feed you love,....there's no way in God's name that I can give you a generous injection of the Ten Commandments.....and there's no way in which I can put down your throat a capsule that will fortify you by the basic truths of the Sermon on the Mount! If one wants it, he's got to desire it. And without it a man cannot live.

I never cease to marvel at the number of people who are suffering from spiritual malnutrition. And what a difference it makes when they feast upon the Lord! I saw her several weeks ago as she left from church. Without any inhibition whatsoever I found myself saying to her as I saw her, radiant as she was, "You're aglow with the Spirit" . . . I said, "You're aglow with the Spirit" - - fresh and vital, a person alive!

. . . and I know why!

. . . I know how she reads the Scriptures....

. . . I know how she prays and keeps herself in
communion with God....

. . . I know how she makes for her life a constant
diet of genuine love and good-will.....

Shakespeare has another character who says:

"On what meat does this Caesar feed?"

.....the Christian of all people is the fortunate one. He feeds upon the bread which God himself gives. And that's what God wants most to give. This I most certainly believe.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"THE TONIC OF A WHOLESOME PRIDE"
(Nehemiah 6:11)

IT IS, O GOD, some echo of Your voice
that we need now to hear. In Your own
way prepare our hearts that we may not
miss it. Through Jesus Christ Thy Son,
our Lord, who when He came, came preach-
ing. Amen.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan, author of "A School For Scandal" has a very fascinating moment when one person, part of a small group, discovers that he has to leave ahead of the others. As he gathers his things together and heads for the door, he stands there momentarily and turns to those who remain, and he says, "I go - - but I leave my reputation behind me."

You can't possibly understand what is meant by that? We've all been part of a group, you know, when we have been guilty of talking about other people. That may have happened for Richard Brinsley Sheridan's character. He may have been part of that before he left, and he knew full well that now that he was going, his reputation was at their mercy. So his parting words: "I go, but I leave my reputation behind me."

It's a terrible thing that we do, you know, to other people, when we talk about them behind their back -- we indulge, we allow ourselves a liberty, we take license, in fact, and sometimes we can be very, very cruel, and certainly very, very unfair. But I haven't come here this morning to talk to you about worrying what other people say about you. But rather with all the strength that I can command I come to this sacred desk to ask you: How much thought you've given to your self-esteem? Basically, what do you think about yourself? Not, now, what other people think about you - - but what is the image that you have of yourself?

I presume down deep inside of us, each of us has an image of himself, the kind of person that he thinks himself to be. A psychologist has observed that there are two things that can cripple any one of us. One would be if we had a superiority complex, and we think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. That most certainly can be damaging....

....or if the image that you and I may happen to have of ourselves that smacks of an inferiority complex -- where we don't give ourselves credit for what we really are, and if we constantly sell ourselves short - - - this too can be very crippling!

But somewhere in between I'm suggesting to you that there can be such a thing as a healthy self-esteem, without which a man never rises to his full stature. And unless he has it, he may not be kept from lowering himself, cheapening his method of behavior, stooping to a level that does not become him. The poet very properly has said,

"He who would climb and soar aloft

must ever keep alive

Within his soul the tonic of a

wholesome pride."

...and I suppose what I want to talk to you about this morning really is wholesome pride.

We're told that pride perhaps is the most serious of all sins, if one can make such a statement. But when you and I suffer from pride we're always ruling out the possibility of God, our relationship to Him, of improving our lot, or of loving and serving Him. In pride we think only of ourselves and of ourselves alone. But I'm willing to suggest that you think in terms of a healthy pride, a measure of self-esteem that could hold you in good stead, and without which, I dare say again, you will never come into your full maturity.

Now all of this is being triggered by my reading in certain parts of the

Old Testament, and I've come back to my old, old friend Nehemiah. I suggest that maybe you could find time today to read some of the pages of Nehemiah, the book that bears the name of the man himself. And when you read there you may be troubled a little bit that he talks a great deal about himself. But don't sell him short - - he had a right to talk about himself. And we remember him because he happened to have been the kind of man that he was.

He was important.

He was so important that the king recognized him for what he was and named him his cup-bearer. For in those days also they had assassination plots against their rulers, and he was so highly regarded that he was given the trusted position of bearing the cup that would touch the lips of the king, to guarantee that no poison would ever come to the lips of the king. So he had a rather high and lofty opinion of himself. There was only one to be so trusted, and he happened to be the person.

And then it became plain to him that he ought to go back to Jerusalem and undertake the great task of re-building the wall of the city. No small undertaking. He believed himself equal to it. He believed himself definitely assigned to the task. And so he went and got permission from the king to go back.

He surveyed the situation . . . in the eyes of any number of people a well-nigh impossible task, but not so for Nehemiah. He was made of sterner stuff. He was made to lay his hands to nobler tasks. Before long he was successful in recruiting some people to help him, and the wall went up, block by block. He took a measure of pride in realizing that this was being done. It is no small thing to re-build what's been destroyed. Anyone can destroy - - but to re-build is an entirely different situation and calls for really sterner, stronger stuff in leadership.

Well, as is wont to happen, and I am sorry to have to tell you this but

the Bible always tells it as it is - - here is grand and good Nehemiah busy at the task, and then down below a bunch of irresponsible busy-bodies, who can't sign up for the task.....so what do they do then? They berate those who are engaged in noble tasks - - they swarm around, they gossip, they spread rumors... ..they constantly ridicule. To undermine him they engage in psychological warfare, they go so far as to say, "You'd better run for your life! -- you'd better escape while the running's good!" Then this man who talks about himself in the book that bears his name rises to his full stature - - - I wish you could visualize it -- and as he stands there he says to those who are gossiping about him and spreading those terrible rumors, those who say 'you'd better run for your life!' - - - Nehemiah says, "Should such a man as I flee? I was not meant to run. I was meant to attempt great things. I was meant to lay my hand to a noble task!" This is a healthy, hearty measure of self-esteem, and it could never have been done, the task to which he laid his hands, if he didn't believe this about himself.

Any number of people with whom I meet in the course of the week . . . I reflect to myself and say, they're crippling themselves, because they're allowing their self-esteem to be diminished - - they really don't recognize themselves for what they're meant to be, for what they could become. They need a good dose, a tonic of a wholesome pride.

As I survey the contemporary scene, one of the things that troubles me very, very much, and I dare say troubles you, is that here and there we have to deal with people who have lost a measure of self-respect. They don't see themselves as what they are meant to be. They see themselves as less than what they're meant to be. I'm always troubled by people who level too easily for the physical, for the materialistic, for the sensual. Man was meant to dream noble dreams, man was meant to reach for the stars. I am always troubled by the way I see people with a low esteem of themselves. It's made evident by the way they

talk....it's made evident by the direction in which they're so easily willing to move. And don't get me wrong, but at times it's made evident by the way they dress! -- the lack of respect that they have for themselves.....

....and what troubles me more than anything else is as they lack self-respect, that means they won't treat other people with a measure of respect that they deserve. If I have a low opinion of myself, why should I have a high opinion of you? -- why should I be motivated to treat you any better?

To the everlasting credit of Nehemiah, he had a very healthy self-esteem. He could never, never have done what he did if he didn't believe that he was made of the kind of stuff that was match for the noble task.

And when God had you in mind, my friend, God was matching you to noble things. When God made you -- and that's an exceedingly precious thought to allow yourself -- when God made you, He had wonderful things in mind. And He wants you to become the kind of person who is equal to them. And you have a right to believe that you can become -- "He who would climb and soar aloft, Must ever keep alive within his soul The tonic of a wholesome pride . . . "

....and that means occasionally you and I have to take stock of ourselves in order to discover the kind of person we are becoming. We can slip very easily.

Why do some of us keep coming back to this place? Some of us keep coming back Sunday after Sunday just to be reminded that we belong to God! -- that God has a claim upon us. Some of us keep coming back to remind ourselves that we are the children of God -- we have a Heavenly Father who cares for us, who loves us, and who has work for us to do.

O. Henry in one of his stories tells about a fellow in a small town who fell in love with the village sweetheart when she was 16 -- the personification of all that was beautiful and innocent.....

....in the plan of his life he left that small town and went

to the big city and soon succumbed to the wicked ways of the wicked world in the metropolitan area, let loose of all of the restraints. A couple of years after he had been in the big city, standing on the street corner one day, he happened to see walking down the street that sweetheart of 16 -- now older, of course, but still as beautiful and as precious as ever. Then it dawned on him, the kind of person he had become, as he looked upon her in all her innocence....

....and O. Henry, I think, as I remember it, has him leaning against the wall and crying, "O God, I'm ashamed of myself for the kind of person I've become."

..."He who would climb and soar aloft, must ever

keep alive within his soul, the tonic of a wholesome pride . . "

....lest, you see, he succumb to the temptation to be less than what he was meant to be.

Some of us shy away from the critical moment in our lives....some of us just don't want to be in a position where we have to make a decision. It almost scares us to death and some people seem to be incapable of it, and want somebody else to make up their mind for them. What a crippling thing this can be. The French existentialist Jean Paul Satre tells about one of his students who came to him during World War II and posed for him a dilemma, and he pleaded with Satre to make up his mind for him....let me give you the situation.

....he was an ardent patriot for France, and he was told that DeGaulle had some people working in a small unit in London, because they honestly believed that there in London they could advance the cause of France in a way that they couldn't as long as their country was being occupied by the Nazis. Nobly intentioned, he wanted to go to London. But then there was the pull -- his aging mother was

dependent upon him, he was the only one who could care for her. This was his dilemma, and he wanted Jean Paul Satre to make up his mind for him - - and Satre refused! Not because he was unwilling to say one decision was right as over against the other decision, or one would be less wrong than the other, but Satre very properly said, "You have to make the decision, because as you make the decision you'll discover for yourself the kind of person that you are."

And again and again when we find ourselves in the critical moment, it's the God-given opportunity for us to decide the kind of person we really are, or to make up our minds then and there of the kind of person we know that we ought to become!

I ask your indulgence for a moment when I become very, very personal. I'm not embarrassed, and I hope you won't be embarrassed. I've never had an identity crisis. My heart goes out to people who don't know quite who they are. I can't remember when I didn't think of myself as a child of God, honestly I can't. And that's one reason why I treasure my relationship with the Christian church, because the Christian church is always reminding me of who I am -- I'm God's child.....

.....and I should also tell you that there were times in my life when I was afraid to die. What youngster doesn't fear death? And as one who was growing up I didn't want to die and I was afraid to die. But I can tell you this with all the strength that my soul can command, and I hope all the respect that you can give it -- the older I have become the more I recognize myself as a child of God, and that takes away the dread of dying. . . . because if I can be conscious when the moment comes, and the angel of death hovers round me, I'm all set for what I'm going to say: "Let me in! I'm

a child of my Heavenly Father!" - - with the words of the old Gospel hymn, "I'm a child of the King."

So I've come to say of myself, if I can believe that so fervently in the moment of death, and it will hold me in good stead, isn't it high time that I keep reminding myself of that each day, that I might live accordingly.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer - - the name rings a bell, of course it does....when the young German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer lay incarcerated in the concentration camp, regarded by all who knew him as a saint . . . he himself was filled with self-doubt. In an anguish of spirit one day he wrote this poem:

 "Who am I?
 This? - or the other?
 Am I one person today
 and tomorrow another?
 Am I both at times a hypocrite
 before others and before myself,
 A contemptible, woebegone weakling?
 Who am I?
 They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
 Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God,
 And I am Thine!"

Happy indeed the man who can say that. He's provided with that healthy, hardy measure of self-esteem without which a man can never rise to his full maturity! For a man is always less than he ought to be until he sees himself as a child of God - - - meant to live nobly.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"BROODING OPTIMIST"
(II Peter 1:19)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Whenever we head for the hills of home we pass through a little village about thirty miles this side of Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The village has, I suppose, maybe 20 - 30 houses in it at the most. Prominently located is the church at the side of the road, and as you might expect, right in front of the church is a bulletin board. The preacher who takes care of that congregation is highly imaginative and creative, and every now and then he personally selects slogans and mottos that go on that church bulletin board.

Some of them perhaps you've already seen in print. I recall this one:

"SEVEN DAYS WITHOUT PRAYER MAKES ONE WEAK"

"TODAY IS THE TOMORROW THAT YOU WORRIED ABOUT YESTERDAY"

....but the one that impressed me most, I dare say, is the one that I last saw -- it was simply put:

"SOME DAY GOD WILL HAVE IT HIS WAY"

I wonder. Isn't that a terrible thing for a preacher to say as he stands at the sacred desk! Because you see, I do brood, and I do suffer a measure of despair, and despondency, when I look at the world of which you and I are a part. It is a wicked world, and I have been known to say on occasion that I have my moments when I think the world is heading faster toward Hell than it is toward Heaven.

That's a terrible thing to have to say, but there again I must admit in your presence, there's quite a bit of evidence that's been amassing. The negative is there . . . it doesn't look very good. Is it really as bad as

all that? Who doesn't have his moments when he talks like that to himself, and even talks like that to other people - - it is a wicked world. And I ask myself the question, honestly I do - - is it true, as the preacher suggests, that some day God will have it His way? Well if I couldn't believe that, in company with you I wouldn't want to live another day. I do believe of course that God will have it this way, but because we're so caught up in this wicked world, we do stop and say sometimes: "I wonder.....I wonder."

I tell you why I can say that - - because I'm standing now with you, I am with you, I'm one with you. And I know something of your commitment and I know something of your devotion to Jesus Christ, and I know that you are the people who pray the prayer that goes something like this - - "Thy will be done" - - I know this is what we say to God. But I also know that we are the same people who give God a rough time. I also know that we are the same people who don't always give God a chance to have it His way. We, too, are willful. As nobly intentioned as all of us may be right now, I'd be willing to wager, if I were a gambling man, that within a half-hour after some of you leave this place you'll give God a rough time. Because once you get out into the arena which is life itself, where you and I have to live out our devotion to Him, as the going gets tough, that's where we say to God, we'd rather do it our way - - - honestly we do.

Now if this can be said about you and me, earnest followers of Jesus Christ, can't you readily understand why I have my moments when I say I wonder if God will ever get it His way? - - when those of us who love Him, when those of us who claim to be the adherents of the faith, give God a rough time again and again.....and He has it rough with us when He wants us to love Him, to do it His way. Well, that's why I say to you as I come to the sacred desk, I have my moments -- the preacher may put it on the bulletin board -- some day God will have it His way.....but I say, I wonder.

But only quickly. Because brood as I may, I do believe in Jesus Christ. And because I believe in Him I am an optimist . . . but I am a brooding optimist. I have to be honest with you, I am not numbered among those who say all is well with the world. It is a pity, really. The world is in a mess -- no question about that. But what to do in the meantime, that's the problem. And some folks seemingly well intentioned try to deal with it in one of two wrong ways -- honestly, now. You have to be very careful! The one wrong way is to assume the role of the optimist, and simply say 'Cheer up, all will be well' -- the pendulum has got to swing in the other direction -- just throw yourself in neutral, things will take care of themselves.....that's a damnable philosophy. God may be in control, and God can control only as He's able to work through people who cooperate. If things are to be made right, there must be people who are willing to see that they come right. This is not heresy to suggest to you that there are some things that God Himself cannot do by Himself. There are some things that only God can do, but He can do them only as He works in and through us. When we honestly surrender and submit and say, "Go ahead, God -- it's got to be Your way -- help us to see it that way."

The other wrong way is to turn pessimist, predict certain doom and destruction, and never getting beyond that note, never giving anybody any ground for hope.

Well, you pay your money and you take your choice if you don't watch out, and you go through life either grinning or growling. Neither one fully becomes the Christian, properly speaking. Somewhere in between there has to be the sense of balance. Brood as you will, but brood as an optimist.

There is one word that does not belong in the vocabulary of the Christian, and that is "hopeless." I remember the battle that I had with myself when I

first went to India. When I was there the very first time, as I stepped foot on that soil, and immediately became aware of the problem which is India, I found myself ashamed of myself because I was using the word "hopeless." Don't misunderstand me, my nature is such that I seem to honestly believe that there is always a point at which one can begin, and then to see some progress made. I honestly believe that. But when I was there I kept saying to myself, I don't know where one would begin, and if one were to begin I don't know where there would be any evidence of progress - - - that's a terrible thing to say, and I'm ashamed of myself, because hopelessness is not a word that belongs in the vocabulary of the Christian.

But I'm not the first to think this way. I'm happy to tell you that when I read the text for you you'll recognize that it's from the days of the early Church. There were others who felt this same way. Let me read for you the text, written by a man named Peter, in his second letter that he wrote, it's recorded as the 19th verse of his first chapter:

"And we have the prophetic word made more sure.
You will do well to pay attention to this as
to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the
day dawns and the morning star rises in your
hearts."

It was a wicked world in that day, but Peter as a committed Christian said there's something such as a day that's going to dawn, and there is such a thing as a morning star that rises in the heart of a Christian.

We like to think that there were other days that were better than ours. We like to think that there are other days in which we could have lived to greater satisfaction. But I ask you now honestly: is any age an optimum age in which to live? I wonder - - an optimum age? I used to say to myself as a youngster, I should have been very happy if I could have lived, as the songwriter put it, "When Jesus was here on earth." What a thrilling thing it might have been to be present and close to Him, to have talked with Him, to

have walked with Him. But age has taught me to reflect and say, I'm not so sure I'd want to have lived then -- to have been caught up with a world that laid hands upon Jesus Christ, and then put Him to death?.....to have been numbered with the world that then and there they rejected God-come-to-us-in-human-form? That's how wicked they were! So wicked and so blind and so insensitive to the truth that Jesus Christ was in their midst and they refused to acknowledge it. The world is a wicked world. But the Christian says, there's ground for hope. There is such a thing as a morning star. The day will dawn.

I've always held the British in high regard -- I'm an Anglophile, you know that. My heart goes out to them, especially these days. You're aware of it, aren't you, that they're having the most serious dry spell in recorded history? -- 250 years they've never had the problem they have now -- which is compounded, of course, by economic and social ills. I just read the other day something that needs to be kept in perspective when I think of their present plight . . .

-- in 1848, Lord Shaftsbury said: "Nothing can save the British Empire from shipwreck"

-- in 1849, Disraeli said: "In industry, commerce and agriculture there is no hope . . . "

-- in 1852, the dying Duke of Wellington said: "I thank God I shall be spared from seeing the consummation of ruin that is gathering about us . . . "

-- in 1806, William Peet said, "There is scarcely anything around us but ruin and despair . . . "

That's the way it's been. Some of us forget it. We go on complaining today about any inconvenience that we may endure, or be called upon to endure.

There's a newspaper published by the Anglican Diocese in York, England. Not so long ago some wit wrote these sentences:

"Our forefathers did without sugar until the 13th century
....without coal fire until the 14th....without buttered
bread until the 16th....without coffee, tea and soap until
the 17th century....without gas, machines and electricity
until the 19th.....they lived without cars, without canned
or frozen food until the 20th century. And then the writer
ends with this question: "Now what are you complaining about?"

We need to remember this thing and get it in proper perspective.

It was not always as good as we have it now. And one needs to look for
the footprints in the sands of time that move in a certain direction, and
then to believe that we too can be caught up and follow in that direction.

Let's leave theology for a moment, if you don't mind, and look at world
history in a wide perspective - - do this now, if you don't mind: try to think
of all the history of this planet in a 50-year span -- everything that's ever
happened has happened in fifty years, the last fifty years, say. If we reduced
the existence of this planet to a 50-year span:

- it took 49 years before the first primitive agricultural
stage was reached
- in that span of 50 years, writing began as recently as
six months ago....printing two weeks ago....electricity
24 hours ago.....organized efforts for world peace only
a few minutes ago.....the creative factors of man's
spiritual life that hold the promise of his future are
but in their infancy.....

As the evidence on the negative side amasses, we must still remember there is
an emergence, there is an emergent trend -- there is a force at work, the
positive, with the stamp of God, His presence.

Professor William Hocking of Harvard, that name to be reckoned with a

generation or so ago, has put it so well when he said, "In a question of position, negative experience counts for nothing if there is but a single positive success." So I say, enter Jesus Christ. At a particular point in history Jesus Christ did loom upon the horizon, He did live obediently in the name of His Heavenly Father....He did exemplify love....He did allow His Heavenly Father to have it His way. But then as you well know He found some people, simple folk, plain ordinary folk, to whom He could say, "Come and move in my direction - - follow me - - head in the way that I'm going." They tried it. They stumbled, of course they did, and they faltered and they failed, but every time they faltered and failed, they got up again and they looked for Him, and they tried to move in His direction all over again.

That's what some of you are trying to do. And that gives the rest of us a ground for hope. You're the morning star that's going to shine for us.

Some of you know that I have breakfast now -- it's become a sort of a traditional thing -- with Annie King at the parsonage at six o'clock on a Sunday morning. You know Annie, the Irish gal who came over here and was dumped on our shores and went into the convent - - she was no more meant for the convent than a bird is meant for a cage.....you know Annie. Annie looks back and remembers the old days: "when the world was safe" Annie says. Annie doesn't realize this, but I can take only so much of this from Annie, because I find myself becoming despondent and brooding. But then I get a measure of strength and I say, "Well Annie, you're right, but remember this, Annie -- you're around -- you're trying to let the Lord have His way in your life. The world isn't all bad, Annie. We still have somebody like you - - and you, and you, and you.

....and I say to myself, brood as I may because the world is going to Hell and is filled with rascals, my responsibility then is to see that the world has one rascal less. And that's your responsibility, too. Brood as I may, I brood as an optimist, because I do believe not only that some day God will have it His way, but God is having His way now, when I think of you. And that's enough to give any man hope. * * * * (Transcribed as recorded)

"A LETTER TO PEOPLE IN A WICKED CITY"
(I Cor. 10:13)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

A correction, if you don't mind, in the title for this sermon. There's a word that ought to be inserted. The printed title reads: "A Letter To People In A Wicked City." A better title would be: "A Letter To Certain People In A Wicked City." And the text, from Paul's first letter to the people who lived in Corinth, the 10th chapter, the 13th verse:

"There hath no temptation taken you but
such as is common to man, but God is
faithful, who will not suffer you to
be tempted above that which you are
able, but with the temptation will
also make a way of escape, that you
may be able to bear it."

Now a word about that wicked city.

That's exactly what it was - - the name of the wicked city was Corinth. It's a city that was destroyed the year of 146 B.C., burned to the ground by order of a Roman general. That's the way it started - - sacked, destroyed, leveled, for about a hundred years. Then it was re-built. But when it was re-built it was re-built entirely, as one may say, "zoned commercial." It had only one primary interest, and that was to make money. And whoever came to the city, then, became engaged in the world of commerce - - buying, selling, always with an eye on the almighty drachma...always with an eye for the almighty dollar.

Now there are also side things that went along with that kind of life. So, materialistic, it was also very sensual. They were a sensuous people.

They delighted in the pleasures of the flesh. It was a wicked city.

In fact, historians tell us that there may have been no more wicked city in all Asia Minor. They even coined a word -- they said "Corinthianize" -- which means that if you ever saw anybody committing what might be referred to as an unmistakable sin, it was the kind of thing that probably first originated in Corinth. That's how wicked it was.

So wicked, I presume, that the Apostle Paul, the tent-mender-turned-preacher, had long and serious thoughts as to whether or not he'd ever visit the city. It was the kind of a city that some people would mark off and never make an attempt to witness for Christ in it. Whatever second thoughts the Apostle Paul may have had, he decided to go to Corinth. And off he went.

He didn't have too much success. It took him a while. He had to rely very heavily upon his earlier credentials as a rabbi, and that got him a hearing every now and then in the synagogue, and very respectfully they'd recognize him as a distinguished visitor and they'd ask him to speak. He'd make a few remarks, and then he'd make it a point to talk with people afterward. He sort of inched his way into the city. Eventually he had a solid corps, a nucleus of people who founded a Christian congregation. He was delighted.

....oh, did I tell you, he spent 18 months there in Corinth, the longest period of time that he had spent with any people that he established as a congregation, aside from Ephesus.... And after 18 months he left, to go on, of course, to advance the cause of Christ elsewhere.

And being the good pastor that he was, the good missionary, he kept in touch, and they kept in touch with him. And after a while it must have saddened his heart to get a letter -- things weren't going as well as they had hoped. They had become somewhat demoralized, and they had all kinds of problems within the parish.....some of those problems created because they

had to withstand the temptations of a wicked city. They had constantly to contend with all the forces at work against them.

And one of the things that they wanted to do was to get their founding father to say, "Well yours is an exceptional case. You do live in a wicked city. So we won't expect quite as much from you as we do from people who may live in what we may call a more optimum situation - - "

.....you get it, don't you? They wanted him to slacken up a bit. They wanted him to say, well the Ten Commandments are pretty rigid, and you have a tough time subscribing to them there in Corinth. I tell you what we'll do. Forget about the ten - - we'll settle for six - - you do your best with six of the Commandments, just any six. Don't try to keep ten....settle for six....
....and I know what I told you about Jesus Christ saying, love your enemies, be good to those who hate you and despise you - - - well, I'll temper that in your case a bit....yours is an exceptional case. I'll tell you what I'll do: I won't expect you to love people who hate you - - just love people who love you . . . I'll settle for that!
Just be nice and decent to decent people.....

Really now, that's the way they wanted him to lay it on the line - -

"I'll modify it -- we'll ease up on it - - " But he didn't.

They wanted the preacher to believe that their situation was a bit different, and they were entitled to some special consideration. The old rules like the Ten Commandments just weren't meant to hold in their case. After all, look how wicked the city itself was, and they were so outnumbered....

.....they were now, remember, just a certain number, a tiny number. But God bless his soul, he simply wrote them truthfully and he said something about temptation being an experience that was common to men everywhere - - they weren't exceptional. But he did say, you have plenty of help, it's available if you want it.

Now it's this whole business that gets into your head and into my head occasionally, that our situation is exceptional, and that God ought to give us special consideration. We're all lumped together, like the old lady who used to sing, "Nobody knows the troubles I've seen" -- as though nobody anywhere had ever found himself in the predicament that's my predicament. Well, we're prone to think that way, honestly we are. We allow ourselves the luxury of thinking that there are such things as optimum situations -- a situation that's so optimum that it's no problem to be a Christian there.

From time to time you've allowed me the luxury of being very personal with you, and maybe at some risk I do lay bare my soul to you. I'll run it now.....I'm one of six kids, as some of you know, and our family is still intact except we've lost both of our parents in recent years. On occasion when I get back home or when I see some of my three brothers and my two sisters, they don't let me forget that I'm the preacher in the family. And sometimes they want me to understand that I have it a bit easier than they have, that they live in a world that I don't live in, that they live in a world that I don't know much about. And I ought to be a little bit easy on them at times, if they think I'm sitting in judgment on them, that they're in a dog-eat-dog world, and a very wicked world, and they're exposed to it in a way that I'm not exposed to it.

Well there are some things that they don't know. If this were an old-fashioned testimonial meeting, and if I had the courage to do it and you had the charity to hear it, you could be sitting on the edge of your seat as I'd

be telling you about some of the temptations that I've experienced in my life. The only difference between my family and me is, if there is a difference -- in the fact that we're subject to temptation -- that we have in common, but it could be that you make it a bit easier for me, now honestly, a bit easier, because I'm surrounded by you and you share your love with me. Some of you pray for me every day. Some of you honestly have served as stumbling blocks on the road to Hell as far as I'm concerned. If it weren't for you I shudder to think what might have happened to me.....

.....but that doesn't mean that I haven't had my temptation, any more than my three brothers have had temptation and my two sisters have had temptations.....

But every now and then we allow ourselves the luxury of thinking that ours is an exceptional situation. The Apostle Paul said, "Temptation is something that's common to every single one of us, and it doesn't become any man to plead on the basis of circumstances . . . "

You know, don't you, that Sinclair Lewis wrote a novel some time ago called "A Work of Art" -- in which he pictured two men, brothers -- same parents, same upbringing, came out of the same situation. But how different they eventually became.....so utterly different as to offer scarcely any points of resemblance. And each ascribes his motivation to the same set of circumstances. One brother said: "My father was a lazy old bum, and my mother was too busy to give me much attention. The kids that I knew were a bunch of foul-mouthed loafers that used to hang about the hobos up near the water tank. So naturally I've become a sort of vagabond that can't be bothered by thinking about paying his debts....and I suppose I'm inclined to be lazy, and not too scrupulous about liquor. But my early rearing did have one swell result -- I'll always be an anti-Puritan. I'll never deny myself the joys of the flesh..."

.....Now his brother said, "As far as the circumstances are concerned, pretty

much the same thing.....

....my father was pretty easy-going and always did like drinking and swapping stories with the boys....my mother was hard-driven taking care of us, and I heard a lot of filth from the hoboes up near the water-tank. Maybe just sort of as a reaction I've become almost too much of a crank about paying my debts, fussing over my work and being scared of liquor. But my rearing did have one swell result: by way of contrast, it made me a good sound old-fashioned New England Puritan . . ! "

It's the old story: "Two men looked out
through prison bars;
One saw mud,
the other saw stars."

You can't hide behind the circumstances, really. God holds us responsible for that! I am absolutely convinced that we've got to get rid of the notion that there are other places where it would be easier to be a Christian. If you and I can't be a Christian where we are, chances are we can't be a Christian anywhere else!

Now that's a sobering thought, and God expects us to be Christian exactly where we are. And to that end God makes His Holy Spirit available to all of us -- equally alike, come wind or weather. He's there. And so temptation is common to all of us. But for those of us who live in this day and age, and when we're prone to say as I told you some time ago, that I have my moments when I'm inclined to think that the world is heading faster toward Hell than toward Heaven, surrounded by all this kind of wickedness, what manner of men, then, ought we to be? -- not to plead such exception -- but to ask for the grace of God to help us to withstand the temptation!

They tell me that out in the wild west, when the Indians were constantly surrounded and they went from hour to hour at the risk of being massacred,

and when they would succumb to the temptation to drink, the old Indian chief had one rule by which he expected the tribe to live: there was always one Indian who had to stay sober -- to be on the alert, to keep the vigil.

Did it ever occur to you that maybe in God's plan for this wicked world, those of us who embrace the Christian faith are meant to be as that one Indian! - - - and be on the alert - - to be all that we ought to be, lest all be lost. Said the Apostle Paul - settle for it, you're not going to escape temptation. But I'll tell you one thing, God will help you. There's help available if you want it.....

....but some of us, like

Augustine of old: "O God, make me pure -- but not tonight!"
.....and that's why there is such a place as Hell - - for people who refuse God's help. Now you think about that for a while.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"TO SEE ONE'S SELF"
(Matthew 15:27)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

Who among us will not admit that some women are easy to look at, a certain number, of course, more so than others. Here and there are women who do their best to give nature a gracious assist. They master the art of making the most of their features. They spend perfectly good money for cosmetics, and on occasion will enroll in so-called beauty courses in order to help them make the most of their make-up time.

Now there is absolutely nothing wrong with this business of giving heed to one's appearance. In many cases we're glad that some folks do. A little grooming can go a long way, and the absence of it can be demoralizing, either for a person whose hair hasn't been styled to her satisfaction, or to the rest of us who would have welcomed some other styling.

In the parish that I served before I became your Pastor we had a woman who by her own admission spent a solid half-hour making herself up before she came downstairs to see another member of her family, or perchance before the door-bell would ring. She placed such a high value upon her own personal appearance.

With that as a background, let me remind you that Dwight L. Moody, the great evangelist, the evangelist who had his day before Billy Sunday, and Billy Sunday had his day before Billy Graham.....Dwight L. Moody used to say to his audiences that any number of people would spend any amount of money, within reason, of course, to the photographer who would take their

picture and then give them a portrait that, in their words, did them justice. But what they really were saying, it flattered them. It made the most of their features. And of course they would not have a good word for the photographer whose end product wasn't to their liking. All of us -- every single one of us, likes to have his better features seen. And again and ever so often there are people who will make it their business to enhance those features when they make their personal appearance.

But on the other hand, says Dwight L. Moody, if there could be a photographer who could take a picture of the human heart, so that you and I could be exposed to people as we really are, that photographer would have to go out of business because he wouldn't have any customers -- that generally speaking, we don't want to be seen as we really are, that we won't much like what we will see. And that's the reason some psychiatrists and counsellors will tell us that some folks are always trying to run away from themselves. At one time or another they've gotten a glimpse of themselves as they really are, and they don't much like what they have seen.

Would you believe me if I were to tell you that that's why some of us think twice before we ask some people to tell us what they really think, because when they answer us they may give us an answer as to what they think of us and they could be that honest! And we're reluctant to expose ourselves to that kind of risk. And what damage we do to some of our friends because we force them into a bind, and we have some friends who will never tell us what they really think because they're afraid of losing our friendship. We put people in that awkward position, you know -- just because some of us are afraid to be exposed to the person that we happen to be, to be seen as we actually are!

For some people introspection is a very demoralizing thing. It's the last

thing in the world that I would suggest to some people, honestly -- to go off by themselves and do nothing but take a long deep look into themselves..... because I'm not so sure they can afford to do it. And yet there are times when it has to be done. A man needs to look at himself. And that's the title for today's sermon: "TO SEE ONE'S SELF" - - and the text is from an exciting chapter of Scripture, not always understood, I dare say....you'll have some trouble with it, I warn you, when you read that 15th chapter of Matthew and discover for yourself the kind of an encounter that Jesus Christ had with a woman who came to Him pleading for attention. In fact the text for this sermon is the 27th verse of that 15th chapter, when the woman after a while said to Jesus Christ, "Alright, Lord, even the dogs eat from the crumbs that fall from their master's table"

....when she said that, she was admitting that

He had forced her to take a look at herself, and that's exactly what she saw.....

Let me remind you of that encounter. She came to Him asking a blessing for a child of hers. She wasn't of the faith - - she was a Jewess. Now Jesus Christ, before He performed any miracle, was always primarily interested in meeting the need of the person, and that's why He took time to engage her in this encounter. And quite frankly, from our standpoint today, He gave her a rough time. He asked her one question after another and He made her feel very uncomfortable....and He backed her up against the wall, to the extent where she had to say, "Alright, Lord, even dogs eat from the crumbs that fall from their master's table - - if that's as low as I am, then I'll admit that I'm that low."

Robert Burns was absolutely right when he said something about a gift being given to us to see ourselves as others see us. It needs to happen again and again. Some folks do us a great service by jolting us into reality, by

calling by the rightful name our vanity, and lack of humility, our hypocrisy, our lack of integrity. Some of us can't take it. But a man will never get very far until he does get a glimpse of himself. And from the Christian perspective I'll tell you exactly what you're going to see, and it isn't going to be very attractive! -- from the Christian perspective you'll see yourself the sinner that you are, as I see myself the sinner that I am.

You begin at that point: from the Christian perspective to see yourself as you are, you're a sinner! And that's one reason why I continue to have profound gratitude for this timeless liturgy that we use in the Lutheran church by which we begin every Sunday at the same point -- you've heard me remind you of this before . . . "We poor sinners confess unto Thee that we are by nature sinful and unclean . . . " No sooner did we begin the service last Sunday than that's what we said.....no sooner did we begin the service today until we said it.....and we'll be saying it again next Sunday, and the Sunday after that and the Sunday after that. And I dare say, no matter how nobly intentioned you and I may be right now, within an hour after this service is over we'll be doing battle with ourselves because we won't be nearly as noble as we are right now....and we'll be committing one sin after another. I know myself that well, and I know you that well. And maybe that's one reason why we trust and respect ourselves as much as we do after these two decades together. Well you begin at that point and in the sight of God you see yourself the sinner that you are.

But I want to warn you, it won't do much good to stand in a corner then and beat your breast and say: "I'm a sinner . . . I'm a sinner . . . I'm a sinner . . . I'm a sinner . . . and just have one lament after another. You begin at that point but you don't stay there! As a Christian you don't have to stay there, because, I'm happy to tell you what I have told you before -- that I'm going to keep on telling it to you because you need to hear it --

every saint has his past, and every sinner has his future.

And that leads to the next level, the other glimpse that you've got to get - - through the lens of God you see yourself a sinner, and also through the lens of God you see yourself as somebody exceedingly precious. Every single one of us remains a child of God. We may be disobedient, we may be contrary and rebellious, but we're still children of a Heavenly Father. And that too we will see through the mirror of the soul.

You and I forget it, however. We not only forget it with ourselves and rule God out of the picture when there's hope for the situation, we damage other people because we forget that this truth applies to them as well -- we rule them out of the picture -- we short-change them, we say there's no hope for them, just because they aren't where they ought to be. When I think of that precious mother of mine, stooped to our level, those six kids of us - - time and time again - - - surely we weren't where we should have been, but she began where we were! -- and dealt with us from that point, and then moved us in that direction.

God deals with us that way. There's an exceedingly precious verse of Scripture that says, "While we were yet sinners, God was in Christ reconciling us to him . . ." - - while we were yet sinners - - - God doesn't wait for us to be good in order to love us. God loves us in order that we might become good! And that's just basic sound philosophy, in any kind of personal relationships, too, I dare say. And that's also the other glimpse that you have to get of yourself in the world of the Arab culture, those blessed Arabs have a way of saying, you don't despise any piece of paper, no matter how tiny or insignificant, because on that scrap of paper the name of Allah, the name of God, can be written.

I'm happy to tell you that God feels that way about us, too! God never washes His hands of us, God never turns His back on us . . . God's always willing to begin with us where we are and then move from that point. We have to

be that honest with ourselves. Disobedient - - yes. But a Heavenly Father who says, "You're still mine! - - I still love you, I will never let you go." And as the poet says, it's like the Hound of Heaven, it will pursue us constantly -- we're that precious! Miserable sinners that we may be, we're precious - - - so precious that He gave His Son to die for us.

Let me suggest to you something that you do well to keep in mind when you look at yourself, and that is that you may discover that you are your own biggest problem. It's not been a very happy thing for me to admit that, but I made some progress when I've begun to remember it. And you, too, constitute yourself as your biggest problem. Quit worrying about a world that's going to Hell, and begin to worry about the direction in which you're moving. That's the way you begin to solve the problems of the world: you make it a point to guarantee that there will be one less rascal in the world, and that's you!

Now I have this suggestion for you also, that when you take a look at yourself in the reflection of God's love, always be honest with God. Sometimes I think that's about the only thing that God first asks from us, that we be honest with Him. And why not! We can't afford anything other than that because He searches the mind of man and He knows our heart. He has that spiritual photographic equipment....He has that spiritual X-ray that sees straight through us. So it's high time that we quit doing a lot of shadow-boxing, and begin by being honest with Him who sees us just as we are.

One of my favorite saints, you know, of the early Church was Augustine. He was a rascal. You name any sin, and he had committed it. But to his everlasting credit he was honest with God - - so honest that on occasion we're told he would pray: "Dear God, take away all of my sins"...(and then with his hands in his mouth he'd go like this) - - "but not one -- save me the last one of them! Take them all away but one of them!" God heard his prayer...and God took all his sins away except that one. And he was plagued by it. And then he made a little

more progress, being basically honest with God, and he prayed something like this: "O God, make me pure!".....(but then that hand at the back of his mouth again) - - "but not tonight." And God heard his prayer, and he wasn't pure that night. And then he reached the point in his basic honesty when he said, "Alright, God, take all my sins away, and I throw myself completely at your mercy - - take over! - - redeem me totally!" And when he could be that honest, you got a saint on your hands.

Now some of us are saying this to you, if you don't mind. We're trying just a little bit harder than we did last month, last week. last year. We really do want to be better than we are. We've taken a glimpse of ourselves and we're not satisfied with what we've seen. Bless her soul, I wish you could have been present the night she spoke or you could have read the letter that she's written Pastor David and me . . . she came to one of the interpretative sessions last week. She's a divorcee with two kids on her hands. The job that she has on Capital Hill is going to be abolished within a couple of months. But she has new life in Christ right now - - she's turning over her life to Him completely. And with all this uncertainty she has this complete faith in Jesus Christ, and as an evidence she said, "Here, I pledge \$2,100 to the Building Fund. Maybe we won't even be here to use it, but I'll do my best to honor my pledge." This is what happens when you turn your life over completely, when you're that honest....."I can't do it any longer by myself, God -- take over."

Well I spoke what I wanted to say as I walk away from this desk now. Be patient with some of us. We have taken a look at ourselves, and we're not satisfied. We're not getting better by tomorrow morning at 10:00 o'clock, as much as we'd like. We're asking God to be patient with us. We believe He will. And it's not too much to suggest that maybe you, by the grace of God, will also be patient with us. And when that happens, a man can afford to take a look at himself.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"TO SEE OUR BLESSINGS"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

I can't remember when my father didn't have a garden. When we lived in that small town there was always the back yard, the field behind it. I can remember how he would go out and spade it all by himself until some of the rest of us were old enough to help him with the spading....I can remember how he would wait for the seed catalogue to arrive, even in mid-winter, and how he would get my sister to make out the annual order and put it in the mail....I can remember when the time came for the harvest, and how he would dig a trench, or perhaps bury a barrel, and in it would go the celery, and the cabbage, carrots, and the other things that he would keep as late, perhaps, as Thanksgiving-time. Sometimes we weren't able to make the winter with some of the vegetables. It was always a measure of pride that he had in his garden, and even when the sunset years of his life set in, he was able to care for a garden until infirmities finally took their toll.

A very vivid picture that I have of my father is his sitting out there under a grape arbor, looking, if you don't mind, and justifiably so, with a measure of pride that he couldn't find so much as a single weed in his garden. Stooped as he was, he took care of it.

I'm glad that he did. For as he cared for that garden he taught me to have respect for the good earth. He taught me, even to this day, no matter where he may go, that it is by the Lord's hand that we are sustained, that his bounty

does not fail. One of the curses that comes to us in an urbanized civilization is that there are any number of kids who grow up today without any appreciation for what it means to have the fruits of the earth planted...tended...eventually garnered, of course, from your own little plot, wherever it may be.

We are exceedingly fortunate here at Saint Luke that some of the vegetables that you see have been grown by members of our own parish. One man in particular who tills his soil is celebrated -- his picture appeared in a recent newspaper, within a garden not very far from Saint Luke, in fact you could walk from Saint Luke to that place right now within a matter of minutes. But not everybody gets a chance to see a garden like that, and not everybody gets a chance to work in a garden.

I bring this message to you on this Festival of the Harvest for the simple reason that only as we keep ourselves close to the good earth can we keep ourselves as a reminder that it is by God's hand that we are sustained. There's a text for this meditation -- it's from the 51st Psalm, it's the 15th verse:

"O Lord, open thou my lips, and my
mouth shall show forth thy praise."

My father used to tell me that God made the garden possible. He wasn't much of a preacher, he wasn't a theologian.....he was a God-fearing man. Oh, he knew very well that he had to dig up the earth -- he knew that.....he knew there were times when it had to be fertilized -- he was aware of that. He knew that a lot depended upon the kind of seed that you were able to get -- he wasn't insensitive to that fact. He also knew that a certain amount of cultivation was necessary, and sometimes you'd have to spray.....and always there were those potato bugs that had to be shaken off, that was the way we dealt with them at that time -- he was aware of that. But he also kept reminding himself that it was God who gave the increase, it was God who sent the rain, it was God who sent the sun. It was God who ordered springtime, and the harvest. And every now and

then, even though he didn't pray as a prayer, he would stand there and lift his eyes heavenward. I knew exactly what he was thinking.....

....he might have prayed, "O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise . . "but in my father's case he didn't have to offer a prayer like that.
Gratitude came very naturally.

The older one becomes, the more these memories come upon us, you know that. And you'll have to indulge me for a second, if you don't mind, while I go back memory's lane again, and this time talk about my mother. I remember her taking me by the hand to visit in a neighbor's house, and I was overwhelmed by the aroma....the neighbor was baking molasses cookies. And she did, of course, what any good neighbor would do, she recognized the hunger in the little boy's stomach, and she gave him a fresh-baked molasses cookie. I don't think in all of my years I've ever tasted a cookie that tasted quite as good as that one did. And I ate it eagerly.....

....but then my mother shook me and jolted me a bit and said, "Aren't you forgetting something?".....and of course I had forgotten what she had taught me, and she was prodding me, and so it was at that point that I first said "Thank you" to the lady.....but I wouldn't have said the "thank you" if she had not prodded me.

Now that's why there's meaning in this particular text that I've read for you - - "O Lord, You open my lips, in order that my mouth may show forth Thy praise." God has His own way of prodding us to become grateful. It doesn't come to everyone naturally. And because we need to be grateful, we need to recognize our dependency, that every now and then you and I have to ask God to remind us to be thankful. Some of us just won't do it on our own.

When Ellwood DeLong, God bless him, now of precious memory - - designed for us the Chapel of the Grateful Heart, he made it a place that's chuck-full

of symbolism. Even the pew ends have symbols, if you go and sometimes sit there and look at the pew ends.....the windows are filled with symbolism. But there's one symbol in particular that has made an impact upon my mind, and that's in the beam directly above the altar. There's a wood carving that represents the Holy Spirit -- like a dove descending from Heaven with fire in its mouth to breathe upon us, to inspire us. That's a function of the Holy Spirit -- to inspire us and to motivate us. And God every now and then finds it absolutely necessary to motivate us and to inspire us, Himself, in order that we might acknowledge His goodness. He was a wise man who took the initiative and said, "Go ahead, God -- You open my lips, in order that my mouth shall show forth Thy praise."

You and I ask God for a lot of things in our life-time -- honestly we do. But I've come to this sacred desk this morning to remind you that of all the things that we ought to ask Him for, we ought never to forget that we ought to ask Him to help us to remind us that we should be thankful. For there's always something exceedingly precious that sets in when a man begins to recognize the gratitude that he owes to someone. We're robbed of something when we forget to be grateful....."O Lord, open Thou my lips, that my mouth shall show forth Thy praise."

I sometimes think it would be wonderful if we could paraphrase that and say, "O Lord, open Thou my eyes - - - in order that my lips shall sound Your praise." My father sat there under that arbor and looked out at that little garden and recognized there the thing for which he could be grateful....he kept his eyes open to what he could see.

How seldom you and I go through life with our eyes kept wide open, that we might be able to see the common mercies for which we should be constantly grateful. As you found your way to this place this morning, there's a fresh world out there! It's clean and it's cool and it's crisp. The rain did something to free a certain element of pollution from the atmosphere, and even when

the chill air set in last night, and you walked from your car to this place this morning, did you breathe deeply? And were you fortunate enough to look up last night and to see the brilliance of the moon, and the striking quality of the stars? And this morning, could you see for a while how completely unclouded it was? May I ask you this: - - it happens every day! -- something as simple as this - - - God has never missed a sunrise yet! Every dawn He gives us a brand new beginning!

O Lord, open my eyes - - - that I may see!

God bless my father.....he sat there and he looked, and he thanked God for what he could see in that garden, and recognized the gracious hand of the Almighty....."Earth's crammed with Heaven, and every common bush afire with God" -- said the poet one time - - "but only the man who sees takes off his shoes and worships; the rest sit around and eat blackberries."

We complain when we get a headache, we complain when we get a backache. There are some people who never know a single hour without some measure of pain. For some of us it happens infrequently, but when it happens it seems as though the whole world has to suffer because of our inconvenience, of our momentary pain and misery. And yet again and again and again there is that constant measure of good health....."O Lord, open Thou my eyes that I may see - - and give thanks."

I prod myself. And God has His way of prodding me, too. I once went for 24 hours when I first made a trip overseas shortly after World War II, without having before me a single drop of water. I can't begin to tell you how grateful I was when I had taken in my hand a glass of water.....in front of us constantly, the common mercies of God.

When I became involved with the appeal for funds for the Enlarged Facility, I had reason to believe that the goal could be achieved because I knew in this parish that there are people who could count their blessings - - people who had

been at death's door, and were snatched from it.....people who had a great burden that they had carried for years suddenly lifted.....people who had been estranged from Jesus Christ and who had found new life.....people who had been separated from one another, and then been reconciled....

....I knew this kind of thing was happening in this parish, I knew it was happening in your life.....

.....and I was banking heavily upon those who could return to God a grateful heart, and I prayed that God would open their eyes that they might see how they had been sustained and blessed.

I don't know how it may be with you, but I constantly give thanks to God for what some of us know in and through Saint Luke Church. For some of us it's a bit of Heaven here on earth, where people endeavor to reflect what God wants to happen here on earth. And there are some of you who are sensitive to this, whose eyes are open to it, and you respond gratefully.

My debt to Ellwood DeLong, again, is very great, for when in the Chapel of the Grateful Heart the words were to be chosen to be placed above the altar - - what finer words for any person? - -

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget
not all his benefits . . . "

The common mercies surround us constantly. Not the least of the blessings that come to us is the knowledge that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Saviour, our friend and our Master, who is always with us, who never leaves us. Only the person who is sensitive, who knows that his sins are being forgiven, who knows that when he dies he has the hope of Heaven, who knows that in this present moment life can be lived purposefully - - - "O Lord, open our eyes, that we may see the blessing that comes to us in the relationship that we have with Jesus Christ."

Now that leads me to read for you the lines of a poem, a man who laments the fact that Jesus probably had a brother who never realized what a wonderful

thing that he had in a brother such as Jesus:

"And Joses, the brother of Jesus
Was only a worker in wood,
And he could never see the greater
That Jesus his brother could.

not

'Why stays he/in the work-shop?'
He often used to complain,
Sawing the lumber, imparting to
woods their stains;
Why must he go thus roaming,
Forsaking my father's trade?
While hammers are busily sounding,
And there is gain to be made?'

Thus ran the mind of Joses,
Apt with plummet and rule;
Deeming whoever surpassed him
Either a knave or a fool.

For he never walked with the prophets
Of God's great garden of bliss,
And of all the mistakes of the ages,
The saddest, methinks, is this:
To have such a brother as Jesus,
To speak with Him day by day,
And never to catch the vision
Which glorifies His clay."

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

FESTIVAL OF PRAISE

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

It seemed to me that there is only one verse of Scripture that could serve as a text for the brief meditation on this Festival of Praise. It is recorded as the 1st and 2nd verses of Psalm 146:

Praise ye the Lord;
Praise the Lord, o my soul;
While I live I will praise the Lord.

I'm not suggesting that next Sunday you bring with you a stop-watch as I indicate to you now that it could well be that one-out-of-every-three minutes that we spend together in divine worship within these walls is given either to music or to singing! That may never have occurred to you.

...let me repeat it: it could be that one-out-of-every-three minutes -- a third of our time spent together in this hour of divine worship - - is given either to singing or to music....

Maybe it's a greater period than that. And well it should be! For Christianity gives us something worth singing about.

Of all the religions in the world, put them altogether, none makes quite as much of the ministry of praise as does the Christian religion. You may not have thought of it this way, but for the devout believer in Jesus Christ, for the fervent follower, he says -- "While I live I will praise the Lord" - - "...come wind or weather, no matter what happens, I'll bring honor and glory to God's name."

When we dedicated the Chapel of the Grateful Heart, that precious quiet

corner within this place of worship under the large roof which is Saint Luke Church, we made it perfectly plain that it was to be known as the Chapel of the Grateful Heart, and that whoever would come and be in that place would be somebody who would come in order to give God thanks. Someone was heard to say that to me - - "But what about a person who might not have anything for which to be thankful? Does that mean he could not come here to pray?"

- - perish the thought that anyone who would come to pray to God should be a person who could not be thankful, should be a person who could not give praise and honor to God's name! The very fact that there is One to whom he could turn is enough for a person to give praise, and gratitude!

No matter how oppressive the burden may be that rests upon a man's heart, there is always One to whom he can turn. And that's enough to cause a man to be grateful and to turn to God with praise upon his lips.

"While I live - - " says the Psalmist, "I will give praise unto God." That means, doesn't it, that a person has to be rather selective, that means he has to be very careful lest at times he concentrate too much upon all the ill that could happen to him, and then permit himself to believe that this is a wicked world, and that the Devil has complete control. Christians accept the fact that evil, while it is strong, never gets beyond second place. The strongest force in the world is the power for good. Christians remember that.

And as I stand at this sacred desk I want you to know that we are the ones who recognize the fact that we not only have a God who watches over us, but is a God who cares for us not only in this world but in the world to come. When as a minister of the Gospel I am called upon to minister to you in your time of grief, surely my heart is made heavy. I cannot have walked with you during these two decades without knowing very well how keenly you feel the passing of

of a loved one. But when I stand with you I am constrained to remind myself that I minister to you in the name of One who translates us from this world into His nearer presence! -- and that is not the worst thing that can happen to those whom we love, or even to us. The worst thing that could happen is to die without the knowledge of the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Job, plagued and perplexed in this world, could say, as it seemed unbalanced, "The Lord gave - the Lord takes away - - "...but he didn't stop at that point! He went on triumphantly to declare - - "Blessed be the name of the Lord." Come wind or weather then, God has given us something worth singing about! -- a God who will never leave us, a God who will never forsake us, a God who sent His Son into the world to die for us, that we might always be with Him. We have something to sing about, because there is nothing, absolutely nothing in this world, that can separate us from the love of God.

Even when sin enters into the picture, Jesus Christ takes the initiative and says, "If you will, I will take your sin away." That's why we call ourselves: "Those who sing the songs of the redeemed."

God willing, tonight some of us will emplane to head for South America, and as an extension of the ministry of this church I will be your representative to a people who are proclaiming the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Their lot is not a pleasant one. They proclaim the love of God against great odds. I should hope that I may be able to take with me a cassette, a tape recording, of your singing this morning, that it may serve as a measure of brightness and joy to those to whom I shall minister in the name of Jesus Christ. And now, on this Festival of Praise, it's time to sing. For the greater part you remain seated, if you will. One word of instruction, if you don't mind -- there's an italicized stanza every now and then, and that is when the congregation will turn to a single voice in the choir to be heard at that point, and then we'll join in otherwise. Sing, now, because you have something to sing about! - - -

(transcribed as recorded)

A FAVORED PEOPLE

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from
God our Father and from His
Son, Jesus Christ, our Blessed
Lord. Amen.

Pastor David, who knows how tiring and wearying travel can be, very thoughtfully and graciously offered to preach this morning, suggesting that perhaps I'd gather up strength for next Lord's Day sermon. But how could I keep myself from the pulpit today? In the interim since I have been gone, every sight that I saw, every sound that I heard, every experience that I encountered, has been weaving itself into the fabric of a sermon that just had to be preached today.

In all honesty, I am brimful of all that I experienced since I last stood at this sacred desk. There has been a passage of Scripture that's made its claim upon my heart, and my mind as well, as I return to this pulpit. Let me now read it for you without any further hesitation. It is Psalm #48, it's verse 9:

"We have thought of thy loving-kindness, O God, in the midst of thy temple."

Now in all likelihood I should tell you that this text refers to a man who went to church. Whether he stood, knelt or sat -- the posture is completely irrelevant -- but while he was there, from a purely human point of view, he thought about the human scene, he thought about the world of which he was part, and within the sacred walls of the temple suddenly it occurred to him that of all the people on the face of the earth, his people were in a favored position. And that's why he says, in a classic manner --

"We have thought of your loving-kindness, O God, in the midst of the temple."

....since I came here to worship it suddenly occurred to me how fortunate I am that I happen to be the person that I am . . . how fortunate I am that I live where I live . . . how fortunate I am that I can be part of the world that's been as blessed as the world I know . . .

Now I want to make bold to give you a rather free, daring and reckless translation of this Psalm. You can read it for yourself. As I read it and re-read it, it occurred to me that I could say it to you in these words:

"Great day in the morning, God! - - suddenly it occurs to me how well off I am! Why, God, when I think of your track record for my people, when I think how your mercies have constantly surrounded us, when I think of what could have happened - - why, God - - I know full well how the enemy amassed itself and came to attack us, and when they realized who we were and where we were and what we had, they were completely demoralized, and they went away. And, God, suddenly it occurs to me that we're well off! We've a great deal going for us. And as I sit here and think about you, I want to thank you....
...and what's more, God, before I leave church I'll tell you what I'm going to do: I'm going to walk around inside the place, and I'm going to continue to think about it, and I'm going to make you a promise, that from now on I'm going to do everything I can to tell the next generation how good we've had it, and how wonderful you are. . . . "

Now I'm warning you, that's a free, reckless and daring translation of the Psalm. But you go home today and you read it for yourself, in whatever trans-

lation you prefer, and I'd be willing to believe that you would come to the same conclusion, no matter how you phrase it -- that the man who had this experience in church was a man who recognized that his position was a favored one, that not many other people were as well off as he.

Now it's against the back-ground of the past three weeks that I come to the sacred pulpit. Some of us have touched base with the Third World -- we've been there . . . we've seen . . . we've heard . . . we've experienced. We shall not again be the same.

How could I walk casually across the parking lot this morning at quarter-after-six, and then come to my study and further reflect upon the responsibility that rests upon me to proclaim God's truth -- how could I walk casually? Did I not walk more seriously than ever this morning when I came to this sacred desk -- realizing, as an example, that just a week ago yesterday the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Chile was in convention . . . ?

...you're impressed, aren't you? -- a church in convention --

and immediately you think in terms of thousands of people, if not hundreds of delegates....

Well there were about 35 people in that room who came to represent the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile -- one out of perhaps 285,000 of the ten million Chileans

How could I walk easily to this pulpit this morning, when I remember how the President of that Church spent hours, and I don't know how many days, dealing with the bureaucracy, just to get permission to have a church convention.

The military took over in Chile -- you know that, don't you? -- three years ago. All constitutional rights were set aside. You don't do anything without the consent of the government. And at five o'clock, a week ago yesterday afternoon, the 35 people who were delegates to that convention, about the only people in the place, became very uneasy....somebody came into the room -- a stranger.

But immediately they sensed who he was. He was from the government. He knew they were going to have an election....they couldn't have the elections without his being present. And so he says, "Go ahead and have your elections -- it's been authorized. You have a vacancy on the executive council that needs to be filled? You can do it. But what you'll do is this: you'll give me three names, and then I'll take them to the bureaucrat. He'll study those three names and then he'll name the person for you. You won't name him yourself. You can propose a slate of three names, but we'll make the final choice . . . "

....how do you suppose I could walk casually to this place today?

-- when I realize that my brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ
live and minister against that kind of background!

I had different responsibilities while I was gone. Incidental to preparing the studies and sharing them with our brothers and sisters in Christ there, I was asked to spend three days with a man, just to give him moral support -- just to be with him! -- as a brother in Christ! -- to let him know that you care -- -- to let him know that we know that he's there.

His lot is not an easy one. Winifred and I had lunch with them the last day that we were in Concepcion . . . that's about an eight-hours' ride down from Santiago. And while we were in his home he told us about the situation in which he finds himself. He came to Chile about three years ago, just when the military took over, and immediately he got involved in trying to help people. He was there as a minister of Jesus Christ -- he didn't care what the regime was. He only knew that there were people who had to be ministered to, to be cared for and to be helped.

Some of those people who came to him were the enemies of the state. Now you know exactly what they did to him -- guilt by association. His mail is censored. And sometimes on the street corner opposite his apartment occasionally somebody who just stands there and watches the people who go up to see him. He

has an office in his apartment . . . the houseboy -- he's a man -- is an informer....he hears everything, he sees everything. How can I walk casually to Saint Luke Church today, when I realize what so great freedom I have, and my brother in Christ does his day's work against that kind of harrassment?

How do you suppose I felt when I stood in this pulpit at 9:45, when just before that service began I greeted her in the corridor -- she's one of the Chilean refugees that Saint Luke Church has sponsored. She's a lovely person, charming, beautiful. And before I realized it I was telling her about the beauty of Santiago - - it's springtime there now, the foliage is perfectly beautiful, roses as big as my hand . . . I mentioned the streets on which we walked and shopped, Avenue del Providencia, Avenue del Santa Maria . . . her eyes began to mist. I felt like a heel! Santiago was her home! No matter what we offer her here in America -- a free world, a new world, a brave world, and we welcome her and her family, of course - - but Santiago was her home. She will not return. She cannot.

...how do you suppose I felt when I talked to her! I could not come easily to this sacred pulpit this morning, even though I could not keep myself from it. So with the Psalmist of old I say to myself, as I view the world of which I have been part: "O God, how favored we are!"

Now I recognize full well that the Psalmist lived in the pre-Christian era. And he permitted himself to believe that he had a particular spot in God's heart that nobody else had. Well don't get me wrong, and my commitment to Jesus Christ is firm enough to know that God does not love us more and them less! I can't explain to you why we happen to be where we are and why our lot happens to be what it is. I only know our position is more favored. And some of you have heard me say this again and again, and I'll go on repeating it as God gives me breath and energy to the day I die - - I'll thank God that when my father wanted to go to another world, and he left his beloved Lebanon, that

he came all the way to the United States.

In Chile there's still a state of siege, after three years. And again let me say, constitutional rights are put aside. Now if this doesn't much impress you, if you have yet to get on fire for human rights - - then let me talk to you about something that you might understand a little easier.

No matter how much you complain about inflation, in Chile last year it was a point a day -- 360 percent last year....this year might be a little bit better, maybe 200 percent. The poor? If they're lucky they may make 50 - 60 dollars a month. In Peru, beef - - you can buy it if you have the money, fifteen days out of the month. Half of the month it's not slaughtered, it's not available....

....you complain about the high price of food? It's an established fact, the study has been made - - here in the United States we spend about 17% of our income for food. In the Third World, about 68 to 70% of your income goes for food.

.....there's a curfew in the place that we visited. We no sooner landed in Lima than the man who drove us to the hotel said the curfew -- well if you're out at night between one or five in the morning, the military sees you, they shoot and then ask the questions afterward.....

I cannot come easily to this pulpit this morning, even though I can't keep myself from it, because I feel tugging at my hand is my brother-in-Christ, Viktor Astacio, and the chains in which he finds himself.....and then I remember Dias, who said to me, "Pastor, I got a copy of the yearbook of the Lutheran Church in America...I have seen the statistics of Saint Luke Lutheran Church of Silver Spring, Maryland - - ".....I will give you his exact words . . . "If only we had the crumbs that fall from your table!" And then at his invitation I told him about Saint Luke. And when I was finished he had three words for you . . .

first I told him how every day every single family in this congregation is remembered in prayer...I talked about the Prayer Partners, I talked about what happens a half hour before the first service on any given Sunday in Saint Luke, that, today we have five services -- a half hour before the first service at 8:00 o'clock this morning, at 7:30, there were people in the chapel praying, that God may have His way with us. And when I finished talking about that he said: "Yours is a praying church!" ...and his eyes were moistened.

And then I told him how by the kindness of the Church Council you gave me this time to go to South America, and how, before I went, I wanted to make sure that certain things were cared for and how we threw all of our energies into talking about the enlarged facility, and I told him about your response, because Pastor David was kind enough to send me some information. And how when I would return we would talk about what lies ahead for 1977, meaning that within a period of two months we'd be subscribing over a million dollars for the work of the Lord....and I also told him about the way you care for one another, about Somebody Cares, about the way the circles in particular, and the Key People minister to other people in a pastoral way, and how at the very time we were down in South America, there were certain members of our congregation who were going into a home where there is a lady with terminal cancer, just to be with her. And again his face lit up, and he said: "Yours is a giving church, isn't it?"

And then I spoke about the New Members' classes, and his word was: "Yours is a growing church." And again he said, "If only we here could have the crumbs that fall from your Saint Luke table!"

Well now, let's get back to that Scriptural passage -- you read it for yourself again and allow yourself the freedom that I've allowed myself, how the fellow said when he went to church, "Now I'm going to think some more before I leave, God, and I'm going to make you a promise: I'm going to tell the next generation about it." Well that's part of the secret of Saint Luke Church.

We know what we have! And we don't keep it to ourselves.

Any tourist who goes to Peru inevitably goes to Lima, and when he goes to Lima he's going to go to Cusco. From Cusco he'll go to Machu Picchu -- now let me tell you a little bit about that -- that's a monumental ruin, that's exactly what it is. You've read about it -- a civilization that was lost to the outside world for 400 years. 400 years ago and more, some of those people when they saw the enemy coming and they said, "We'll get away from civilization as we know it, and we'll build our own citidel for ourselves." And that's exactly what they did -- it is monumental, it's amazing! Nothing on the face of the earth can compare with it. With their own hands they built their own little Shangri-la. If my pictures are good I'll show them to you some day -- you can see them. But what happened? They shut themselves off from the rest of the world. Now you have nothing but a monument of ruins. They kept it to themselves....and they destroyed themselves.

God, how favored we are! We have so much! But I'm going to tell you one thing, God. We are going to pass it on. We're going to set it into the next generation. We're going to face another year -- of giving, of praying, and of growing.

Winifred and I will be signing our 1977 pledge card in a way that we've never signed any other pledge card in Saint Luke Church. I think you can understand why. Every time we come to this place -- we call it by name -- it is precious. We're fortunate. But God, we know we can't keep it to ourselves!

.....maybe you'll feel the same way.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"AN ADEQUATE PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE"
(I Peter 4:10)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son,
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

There is no such thing as a poor sermon.

With that statement now you may agree or disagree. But a word of explanation regarding my position is in order.

A sermon may be poorly prepared, a sermon may be poorly delivered. But there is no such thing, really now, as a poor sermon. Granted, of course, you have a committed preacher, a man who earnestly desires to communicate the truth of God, and granted, of course, you have a congregation with receptive minds, people who earnestly want to pay attention to the Word of God. When you have these two, a committed preacher, an earnest-minded congregation, you can never get such a thing as a poor sermon, because from our Lutheran tradition we're given to understand that the man who stands at the sacred desk is never the preacher. The real preacher is the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit reaches out and claims this person. Whatever his limitations, whatever gifts and skills he may or may not possess, the Holy Spirit uses him, then, to communicate the Gospel. That's why I can say to you, there is no such thing as a poor sermon.

Phillips Brooks, God bless his soul, that grand and noble one who was the preacher who distinguished the pulpit of Trinity Church in Boston, used to say when he was asked, "What is a sermon?" - - - "It's the communication of truth through personality." Of course by that he meant God's truth, and a personality that's claimed by Jesus Christ. Sermons may vary, then, from place to place and from preacher to preacher, but granted the preacher is committed and the congregation is earnest-minded, you'll never end up with a poor sermon.

Now having said that, let me reflect a bit more in your presence, if you don't mind, as I come to the sacred desk today.

Some sermons are cast in a prophetic note -- the preacher has received a revelation. When he stands at the sacred desk, in no uncertain terms he says, "Thus says the Lord!" -- the implication being, now, "You listen! You have no option in this regard, this is exactly the way it is and you can't argue with it."

I don't come in that manner to the sacred desk this morning, although I welcome the moments when God claims me as a prophet. I come this morning, rather, in this manner, as one who has wrestled with a particular passage of Scripture, seen it cast against a particular background, and caught up with a particular mood and disposition that claims me today.

(Quite parenthetically, you know that the sermon schedule for this church, generally speaking, is planned a year in advance. Before I even think in terms of going away for the summer, if that should be my good fortune, I sit down first and plan the preaching schedule come September to the next June or July)

The sermon for today bears the title: "An Adequate Philosophy For Life." It's been triggered in my mind for a number of weeks. But now you have to hear the background against which it's cast this morning.

As we were winging our way from South America about ten days ago, we emplaned in Santiago, we put down temporarily in Lima -- and then that non-stop flight from Lima to Dulles Airport. It was a night flight. While I ordinarily cannot sleep on a plane, for some unexplainable reason this time I could, and fortunately there were enough empty seats that some of us could stretch out across all three of them, and I slept for four hours.

But when I was awakened I found myself walking up and down the aisle. And

as I did so, momentarily it seemed as though I stood at this seat or that seat and I looked at what I saw - - the different people who left right then and there a marked impression upon my mind. And all kinds of questions started to loom upon the horizon . . .

.....I wonder who you are? I'll probably never see you
again....I've never seen you before.....

.....I wonder where you've been, and I wonder what took you there....?

.....I wonder where you're going now, and I wonder what the
circumstances of your arrival will be....will there be
somebody there to meet you?.....

.....is yours a mission of business?

.....are you returning on this flight as a sense of emergency?

.....what will be the kind of world to which you return?

.....how long have you been away?

.....will people discover the difference in you now that you
have been away? ...and will you be prepared for the
difference that you may have to face once you arrive?

.....and then the preacher in me rose to his full stature, and I found myself asking this type of question: How related is your mission to God? How real is the God-factor in your life? How much do you think about God, in your journey through life, because all of life is a journey . . .

. . . and quite honestly, I'll have to tell you, I'm glad that I was simply musing. I'm not so sure that I could have taken the answers that some of them would have given me.

You see, when I get away from the security which you offer me, when I get away from this blessed company of the fellowship of the redeemed which you are, I find the world out there so different. When I rub shoulders with them, I discover, much to my regret, that so many of them have no sense of mission at

all! There's no great direction that's drawing them. Bluntly put, they live their years without any reference to God! And this grieves me greatly. The older I become, the more distressed I am with the realization that ours happens to be a generation, generally speaking, of a people who live life without any reference to God.

It was intimated for me some time ago when Visser D'Hooft, that marvelous person who had been Secretary of the World Council for a while, he's the one who said "Ours is a generation for whom hell has no terror, and heaven no invitation" - - which is simply to say that in between you have people drifting without a sense of direction, because they have no relationship to God. They're not sustained by an adequate philosophy of life.

Too many people, any number of people that I know - - they're born, they grow up, they get married, they work, they accumulate some things, they make some money.....and after a while, 50 - 60 - 70 - 80 years, they die, and about the only thing you can say at that point is "So what?" - - what difference did it really make? It's the God-factor that always makes the difference, you see.

I'm terribly distraught by this general sense of meaninglessness. I was impressed when I picked up the bulletin for today, to discover that the person responsible for making the selection from "Pages in a Diary" chose that sentiment that I had recorded about a year ago - - the great psychologist testified that "About one third of my cases are suffering from no clinically definable neurosis, but from the senselessness and emptiness of our lives."

In company with any of you who have done any kind of traveling, I try to catch up with my reading once I return, and I reach for a British newspaper that comes to my desk regularly. And I was pleased to discover that Michael Green -as a new book that just came off the press in October called "You Must Be Joking." The reviewer expresses sentiments that have possessed my soul in

recent times - - " . . . never before has there been such a wide-spread belief that in the end nothing matters. We came from nothing, and we go to nothing. No values are implanted in us because there is no God to implant them. No part of the human frame survives death because there is no eternity. Meaning has disappeared from life. More money, more leisure, yes. But don't talk to us about meaning in life because for contemporary man there just isn't any.

" . . . Now you look back and you remember some of the books that you've read in recent time, some of the poetry that you've read, some of the plays that you've seen. The poet, the novelist, the dramatist, the playwright -- they've reflected again and again and again the meaninglessness that characterizes contemporary man. What, in fact, the artist has done is to bring home this meaninglessness to every level of society. It comes through the film, it even comes through pop music. It is everywhere . . . "

And then he refers to David Crosby's song, "If only I could remember my name" - - is there anything as poignant as that! And this is the way some of the lines in that song go:

"I thought I met a man, who knew a man, who knew
what was going on.
I was mistaken. Only another stranger that I knew.
I thought I had seen someone who seemed at
least to know the truth.
I was mistaken. Only reflections of a shadow that I saw."

You know I take myself to task periodically, as well I should, perhaps more often than I do, to remind myself of my orientation and my relationship to God. I have my moments of depression, I have my moments when I too ask: "So what!" But then, thank God, I am brought up short and I do remember who I am, who I'm meant to be, and what I'm meant to do. And I've never come to this sacred desk with greater conviction regarding these things than right now.

Which leads me to suggest that you ought to do some thinking about what happens here on the Lord's Day. Do you think for a single moment that I ever come to this sacred desk casually? Do you think for a single moment that I take lightly my responsibility to be, as I put it, the shepherd and bishop of your souls? There were those two Sundays when I was away from you. I honestly recommend people getting away from one another occasionally, so that when they come back they can better appreciate what is theirs. It's a shameful thing to take for granted what you experience so regularly.

....Which leads me to say to you -- can't you possibly keep it in proper perspective what we have here in such a precious way in Saint Luke?

- - every Lord's Day when we come back together, what do we do? -- we touch base with God!

- - every time we meet, what do we do? -- we get ourselves re-oriented in case we have missed the way during the past week.....

....that's what we do. And every time I come to this sacred desk, and your other pastor as well, and I know this to be true, together we want to introduce and re-introduce the God-factor. Not just God in general, but the One Who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When John Brockhoff was able to enter into the planning and the designing of the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Atlanta, Georgia, he insisted that the architect place these letters carved into stone, so that no matter who the preacher would be who went to the sacred desk, his eye would always fall upon these words: "SIR, WE WOULD SEE JESUS."

And when you and I come back to this place Sunday after Sunday, that's exactly what's meant to happen -- to deal with the eternal dimension, to deal with the God-factor, to relate our lives to Him to Whom we belong.

And now the text for the sermon: the 10th verse of the 4th chapter of the First Epistle of Peter:

"As every man has received the gift, even
so minister the same one to another as
good stewards of the manifold grace of God."

That provides you an adequate philosophy of life, I tell you. Each of us is someone who has been given something, to be used, to help somebody else...an adequate philosophy for life which provides the basic meaning, without which we cannot live! - - and that God is our Creator, God gave to each of us something. And He says, you're meant to use it, to glorify me with it. And as you glorify me, other people will be better, so that when you die they won't simply say, "So what?"

In the old Westminster Catechism of the Presbyterian Church the first question was always: What is the chief end of man?

And the answer, some of you know: The chief end of man is to glorify God
and to enjoy Him forever.

One of the happy things that's come on the scene recently is that we Christians talk in terms of celebrating life, for life is a journey that's meant to be taken happily and beautifully. And no man is ever happy unless he realizes that what he has he has because it's been given. And even life itself is the priceless gift.....and over against that the more precious gift is life eternal in Jesus Christ. But any man's journey through life, for the Christian, then, becomes a destination which is Heaven.

I want to close with a very simple illustration. There was a very fine family that lived on a fine street and they had a wonderful relationship in the neighborhood.....what a good thing to say about people! This family was going to leave the neighborhood, they were going to move away about a thousand miles. And somebody got the bright idea, just as you would have gotten it, well we ought to have a celebration before they go - - let's have a farewell party,

but let's make it a surprise! So they made all the plans so that it would be a surprise.

It was to be a block party. And when the day came for the celebration, the police had barricaded the street, they set up the tables, they brought the food from their pantries and kitchens, and then they said, "Let's go and get them now, let's bring them on the scene." A delegation went to knock at the door....they knocked. They got no reply. They became anxious. Somebody said, "Let's go and see if the car is in the garage." It wasn't there. The guest of honor wasn't about to show up.

....and then it occurred to them, that in all of their planning, nobody had made certain to make the contact, that the guest of honor would be invited to appear on the scene. Make the transition in your thinking now, will you? God is meant to be the guest of honor constantly in our lives. But in all of our anxieties, in our feverish pace even for preparing for life itself, too many of us forget to make the contact.

I am reluctant to tell you this, but every now and then when you come to me, some of you, for counseling, this is what distresses me greatly - - I try to introduce the God-factor. Some of you just don't know what I'm talking about. And you'll never know how heavy my heart is after you go away, because I know full well that without Him . . . without Him without Him . . .

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"NO BORROWED CREED"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
the Father and from His Son,
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

Let me begin in this way, whether fair or not, by putting this question to you: which now is greater -- to be able to ask the right question, or to be able to come up with the right answer?

I put it to you this way because I'm honestly convinced that there are some people who go through life and suffer miserably because they've never considered the great questions in life, they've always settled with something that deals with trivia. They've never come up face-to-face with the really big questions. Now which is the better thing: to be able to ask the right question, or to be able to give the right answer?

This prefatory statement comes to you now as on this Christ The King Sunday I ask you to go back with me and to consider what happened once upon a time in a city where kings were crowned. The rumor had spread wildly - -

"He's come! He's here! He says he's meant to be our king! The report has it that there were even people who came out to greet him and they formed a procession, and as they marched into the city they acclaimed him king in the lineage of David himself! -- can you imagine that! He talked some, about a kingdom that he's going to establish. The city that was there to receive him has gone wild! "

....well, that's the rumor that spread.

It made such an impact upon certain authorities that even the church council called a special session and appointed a committee to look into it:

What is this report?.....Who is this one who says he's born to be king? The Roman authorities themselves doubled the guard, taking all the necessary precautions. They heard the news uneasily....for them it would mean a riot, and insurrection.

Well then things quieted down, for a little, because this kind of a rumor started to spread: "It's only a hoax! He isn't really a king -- you know what he is? -- we found out! He's a carpenter's son! He's a plain ordinary person! -- but for some reason he's been going around the country-side hallucinating. He talks about a kingdom -- he talks about a kingdom of heaven that he's going to establish here on earth! And what's more, he's gotten some people to believe it. And they have that same far-away look in their eyes that he has. But it's only a hoax, honestly! Relax -- nothing's going to come of it. Remember, he was a carpenter's apprentice, and for the most part he simply did a great deal of talking . . . "

Well, they did trump up some charges against Him, they took Him that seriously. You don't trump up charges against people that you don't take seriously. So they hailed Him into court and they had Him appear before the Governor, Pontius Pilate. Now that's where you have to focus for the moment, like two worlds meeting, two people confronting one another. Then Pontius Pilate, against the background of all that he had heard, not quite sure what to do with this man that he has on his hands, puts a question to Him, and I dare say it was the right question: "Are you a king?"

Pilate did well with the question, alright. He shilly-shallied a bit with the answer. But that's not the important thing for the moment. The important thing is that Jesus pressed him, as only Jesus can corner a man. And Jesus

asked Him certain questions that constitute the text for today's sermon -- a sermon that bears the title "No Borrowed Creed" -- the text being the 34th verse of the 18th chapter of the Gospel according to John. I'll read it for you first in the classic King James translation -- now get it again:

"Pilate says to Jesus, Are you a king?

And Jesus says, Sayest thou this of thyself,
or did others tell it thee of me?"

The New English Bible puts it this way, it's a bit clearer:

"Is this your own idea, or have others
suggested it to you?"

Now I've come to this sacred desk this morning to put all the ardor of my soul to focus at this point. Jesus Christ is asking him the question which comes to the heart and the core of our religious experience. Freely put, Jesus Christ is saying to Pontius Pilate: "Do you honestly believe this? Are you absolutely convinced? Is this Pontius Pilate who is asking the question, or are you simply repeating something that you have heard somebody else say?" Bluntly put: "Pilate, tell me, is this the real thing as far as you're concerned? Are you laying your life on the line when you ask me this question? Am I to believe that you would want very much to have it so? -- and that you earnestly believe that it's possible?" This question comes to the very heart of all religious experience -- is it real? Is it genuine? Do I say this of myself, or am I repeating what I've heard others say? Is my creed a borrowed one?

There are those who indict contemporary religion as being a lack-lustre affair, that it's lost its vibrancy, and it's no longer radiant. L. P. Jacks wrote a book that I read at the beginning of my ministry that bore the title: "The Lost Radiance of The Christian Religion" . . . for when he assessed religion as he knew it, this was the thing that grieved him most: Christians no longer had the fire aglow in their hearts. They could not speak from first-hand experience. What they were dealing with was something that had been

passed on to them and it had never really become their very own, and therefore it was beginning to lose its radiance.

I shan't blame you a bit if you smile when I tell you this, because when I first heard it it was told to me because of the humor that I was supposed to find in it, and at that time I found a bit of humor in it. And I still do. But then I quickly sobered upon reflection, but this is the way it goes. I'll tell it to you just the way I heard it -- It was a staid, fashionable, highly sophisticated church where things were done very, very properly. But one Sunday morning as the service was being conducted, a man stood up and said: "Praise the Lord! Hallelujah! Praise the Lord -- I've got religion."

...the head usher was a bit shaken. He assigned one of his aides to go up and restrain the fellow a bit. He tried to quiet him, but the fellow stood up and said, "Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!"

I know Jesus is my Saviour! I've got the real thing!"

...and the usher said, "Brother, I don't care what you got -- you didn't get it here."

...upon reflection, I'm sobered as you could be sobered, because that can be said of many churches. They have the trappings, I think they have the right words. But the congregation is dead. They go through the motions, but there's no vitality.

The one thing that I always appreciate when people come to Saint Luke Church for the first time is when they might reflect and say, by way of compliment, "We felt very keenly the spiritual quality of your experience" -- which was simply to say, we believe that God was present. And when God's present you can't sit idly by, it can't be any lack-lustre thing. I can almost scream sometimes when, on occasion -- not very often, but on occasion -- you limp your way through the three Alleluias. Don't you understand what those Alleluias are? They're three shouts! -- people who can't be quiet when they think about the goodness of God and they have to stand and sing!

Did it ever occur to you that it's no small matter that it's the Christian Church that exalts the pipe organ, which is the mightiest instrument of praise known to the mind of man?--That the mind of man has ever been able to fashion? Because when religion for the Christian is the real thing, he cannot help but shout and sing.

Said Jesus to Pontius Pilate: "Do you say this of yourself, or are you just repeating? Is it something borrowed that you're dealing with?" I suggest to you that your religious experience is never real until it becomes your very own. We are cursed because in all too many places we're drawing continually upon the reservoir, the capital that's been built up for us by other people. Don't get me wrong, until the day I die I'll sing the praise of my mother, who first taught me to pray, and close by the very place where I am standing, in the study that I have here at the church, I have a picture of Jesus Christ, where she gathered us together, the six of us, and taught us to pray. And I remember my mother praying. It's the thing that I remember about her most, honestly now. And I have reason to believe that in Glory above, in Heaven, she's still praying for me and for the rest of us. Why can't I believe that? If that was the noble thing she did while she lived, why would God cut that off when she dies? If Heaven is where we do things better, have I not reason to believe that her prayers are even more effective now? But that is not to say that I can coast through life on the prayers of my mother. There comes a time when I must pray, and I must pray by myself. There comes a time when I must stand up and say, This is what I believe.

I am eternally grateful, when the Creed-writer was about his business, that he never so much as suggested that we would stand and say "We believe in God the Father Almighty . . . " It's a far nobler thing, and better, that we do when we stand up, even in the presence of other people, and each one of us says, "I believe . . . " You cannot write off your religious experience in

somebody else's name. You cannot have a religious experience by proxy. If it's valid it has to be something that you work out in the crucible of your own soul.

I am dismayed, and Pastor David and I discuss this frequently, at the fact that any number of young people across the nation are being attracted to the cults and to the occult. We ask ourselves the question: why? Is it because they have attended all of our services, they've listened to all of our preaching, they've read all of our books, and have not been satisfied? I am fairly convinced that one reason why some people turn away and go elsewhere is because there they found something that seemed so very much alive.

Are you aware of the fact that the Christian groups in this country that are growing the greatest are the groups where people easily talk about their commitment to Jesus Christ? It's the fundamentalist groups that are having the greatest growth, while the old main-line churches are suffering a decline. And without hesitation, without any embarrassment, people are inclined to speak easily about what Jesus Christ means to them. Now don't get me wrong, I wouldn't turn Saint Luke Church into an old-fashioned cheering section that's akin to what happens in a stadium. But there could be something wrong with us if when we come together there is a lack of passion, there's a lack of enthusiasm, that one would be hard-pressed to find any degree of vibrancy. You simply can't know Jesus Christ and live a lack-lustre life.

Would you believe me if I were to tell you that each time I come to this pulpit I realize that God has placed upon me the responsibility to testify to Him as I know Him? And whatever else you may understand a sermon to be or not to be, surely it is this: a preacher standing up and saying, "This I know to be true!" Among the many things that I covet for Saint Luke Church is that the day may never come when you may have to say to yourselves, what this church needs more than anything else is a preacher who knows God other than second-hand.

One of the greatest achievements of English music in the realm of the oratorio is the Dream of Gerantius, written by Sir Edward Elgar. You may know that at the end of the original score of the work, Elgar wrote these words: "This is the best of me. For all the rest, I ate, I drank, I slept, I loved, I hated. Like all the others. But this I saw. This I knew. This is anything of mine, is worth your memory."

.....I should like to be remembered, when the day comes that I no longer stand in this place, as the man who stood up and told you, without embarrassment, without hesitation, of the goodness of God, and the greatness of God, and the love of God, and the salvation through Jesus Christ which is meant for you....and you.....and you. And that / ^{he} was able to say it because in the crucible of his own experience he knew it.

Poor: Pontius Pilate, he wasn't sure. It's a terrible thing to consider the fact of God, and wonder. Some of you have been kind enough and honest enough to say to me, "But Pastor, I lose the glow occasionally. How can I have the radiance restored?" I spent a significant three-quarters of an hour hesterday with a precious gal. She'd warm the cockles of your heart if you could see her. I confirmed her a few years back. Now she's out in the dog-eat-dog world, and it's not an easy thing for her to keep her faith vibrant. That's what we talked about - - is it possible not to lose the radiance?

I have a prescription for you, if you don't mind. It's a very simple one: To make sure that the glow remains -- Stay close to Jesus. Now don't fault me for using a cliché. I'm not using it glibly. I only know that there are some people whose company I seek because I cannot afford to be away from them. I always stand a bit taller after I have been with them. They add to my life, they do not detract. And I'm always the better for having been with them. Life takes on a new dimension when I see it through their eyes...they keep a spring to the step, they keep the glow in my heart. This is what Christ has

done for us. Christ came into the world to meet us where we were, where we are. Stay close to Him. People who kept close to Him were the people who turned the world upside-down.

My second prescription is: Keep praying. But I know what some of you will say to me - - we don't pray as we ought to pray, Pastor, because God doesn't seem very real to us....and I respond immediately, God doesn't seem real to you because you don't pray enough. Make it your business to keep in contact with Him. Keep that relationship vital. When Norman Vincent Peale because the Pastor of Marble Collegiate Church on Fifth Avenue, New York City, they tell me his first Sunday he stood up and there held in his hand a pillow, on which were two well-worn spots. Recognizing the fine quality of his predecessor's ministry, he said, "This is where my predecessor got his sermons. He told you about God because he first heard about God on his knees." Keep praying.

And my final suggestion: Keep loving. The people who love are always the ones who are nearest to God. If you want to make sure that God's real to you, then ask yourself the question: how much do I love? Keep loving. Keep praying. Keep very near to Him, and the glow will stay there.

We're meant to be happy, we're meant to be joyful. There's no other religion on the face of the earth that sets its soul to music as much as the Christian faith. Only Christianity really sings because the people honestly believe they have something to sing about. Before it's too late, my friend, make sure that yours isn't a borrowed creed....before it's too late, my friend, make sure that you're not living off the religious capital of other people. Because you have no assurance that that supply can be unlimited. Only as you find in the crucible of your own experience the truth of God do you have something that will never fail you. This I most certainly believe.

* * *

"CIRCLE OF LOVE: JOSEPH - A JUST MAN"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

During these four weeks before Christmas which is the season of Advent, the sermons to be preached from the Saint Luke pulpit will share a common theme known as "The Circle Of Love." As you may or may not surmise, we'll be talking about certain personalities who are caught up in the Christmas story, all of whom reflected the most Christlike of all the virtues.

Now let it be clearly understood that no event or incident is ever to be fully appreciated save as we see it through the people who were involved. The great truths are never to be appreciated in abstract and in abstract alone. There is no such thing as love in the abstract. We recognize the meaning of love because love became incarnate. God is love. We never fully understood what that meant until God gave us Jesus Christ. The great truths are never to be appreciated in abstract.....

- - we respect truth because we have known people who are truthful
- - we regard beauty in a treasured sense because we know people
of whom we say, they are beautiful, and we're talking
about the soul....

We subscribe to love because we have seen it become incarnate. So it is with the Christmas story. Nothing like it is known to the mind of man. It portrays love -- God's kind of love. It is the reflection of the divine in the human scene.

Now I'll grant you that while you think of Christmas you invariably will find a star looming on the horizon.....and while you think of Christmas as we understand it, invariably you'll begin to hear angels sing. But you never

really know the meaning of Christmas until you think in terms of what was found within a circle of love. . . . the Holy Child of Bethlehem, surrounded by a just man named Joseph, a maiden pure called Mary, shepherds humble, wise men who came seeking.

Today, the first in the series of sermons based upon the general theme "A Circle Of Love - Joseph: A Just Man." And the text is the 19th verse of the first chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew:

" . . . and her husband Joseph, being a just man . . . "

Now you take it from there. What does that indicate? What does it imply?

It's amazing how little we really know about Joseph, there isn't much in the record. But there's much that we can read into the record. The very words " . . and her husband Joseph, being a just man . . . "

I'll grant you that for some people who read the Bible, and when they come upon Joseph and his relationship with Mary, they're somewhat bewildered . . they can't quite figure out this relationship that he had with her. Well, maybe it might help you a bit if you'll allow me to review for you the Jewish concept of marriage, and the procedure that took place as far as Jewish families were concerned.....

- - to begin with, there was such a thing as the engagement.

Now the engagement was often made while the children were very, very young. The parents got together and they decided that their daughter was going to be married eventually to the son of certain people that they knew.....and the parents got together and made the arrangement, they agreed upon it....

- - and then as they became older, the betrothal became effective -- this is what we might call the ratification of the engagement into which this couple had been previously entered by their parents, with which they had nothing to do whatsoever.

The arrangement could also have been made by a match-maker.....

Now when you came to the second stage -- first the engagement, then the betrothal as they became older -- it was possible, and this will please any number of you, for the girl to indicate that she was unwilling, and that she had no intention to follow through. She could build a case as best she could and indicate to the parties involved that she would not become that man's bride. Nonetheless, once the betrothal was entered into, it was absolutely binding, and it lasted for a year. And during that year, to all intents and purposes, the couple was recognized as man and wife....and it could not be terminated in any other way except by divorce, or where a man would put away, put her aside, the woman to whom he eventually was to have been married.

As you and I open the Bible and think in terms of the Christmas story, it's at this stage that we find Mary and Joseph -- in the betrothal period. And when it's made known to him that Mary is with child, from a purely human perspective he must have been completely bewildered. Don't let that disturb you, because when God becomes involved with us, who among us at any point can ever really understand the mind of ^{little}man? We're not meant first to understand. We're meant first to respond in faith.

It's a very gratifying thing that as you read the Scriptures, Joseph is referred to as a just man, and that means that you and I can feel very warmly toward him and think kind thoughts, because being a just man, it means that he would do the decent thing. He would do the noble thing. As enlightened by the Holy Spirit, then, he stood by Mary, and together they went to Bethlehem. So that's where you begin when you think about Joseph -- a just man, a good man, a decent man. And God always has a way of bringing them into His circle of love. And that's why some of us want to be found within a circle of love, because there are people there that we not only can love but we can

also respect for the integrity that becomes them. You can't possibly think of Joseph without thinking of him as a just man, honorable and decent.

Now let me say to you immediately that when God wants something done in a very special way He may first look for a man who is decent, who is honorable, who will respond in faith to what He offers. God's preferred way is always to work through people, but He needs the kind of person that He can trust with His assignment.

The second thing that I can tell you about Joseph is that he was a villager, and for some of us that creates very warm and friendly feelings, because you name it, the word village, and you think of a small community, a closely-knit community, where people espouse certain values and where there are always people who kept you in line if you deviated a bit. They were either kinfolk or they were neighbors who knew exactly what you were up to and had their own way of saying, "For shame! - for shame! - for shame!" That can happen in a small community.

It's a lot easier, some of us believe, honestly now, to espouse the basic values in a small town. I'm not so sure that a great metropolitan area has ever produced a stirring prophet....you think about that for a minute. Our debt to the small communities remains very, very great.

Joseph was a villager, and in that village he was a carpenter. Now what can I tell you about that? We have every reason to believe that he was an honest craftsman, that when he did a day's work he did it honestly and well. Can't you picture him standing there alongside of Jesus the apprentice, realizing that he had to set before Jesus, the growing one, an example -- recognizing and recognizing full well that every step that he took, the growing Jesus was following after him? Can't you picture Joseph in the carpenter shop at Nazareth, saying to Jesus, "We'd better do that one over again - - there are too many splinters in that yoke for the oxen....let's keep working at it until it's smooth, and then when you take it, Yosef, who lives at the edge of the vil-

lage -- with a measure of pride you can say, 'Look, my father did this! It will last for many a year. It will be easy to wear!'" No shoddy workmanship passed from his hands. I have reason to tell you that would be true about Joseph, an honest craftsman.

In the parish that I was privileged to serve before I came to you, we had some men who plied as their day's vocation the trade of a carpenter. And I used to muse as I'd say to them, "If Jesus came back and walked the streets of South Williamsport, Pennsylvania, and found His way to Messiah's Church on a Sunday morning, I think with discernment He'd gravitate toward the carpenters. He'd feel much more at home with them, perhaps, than He might alongside of me, standing at the altar." For the greater part of His life was spent in a carpenter's shop, fashioning things with His hands so that other people could use them, work that was done honestly and well.

Now the finest of all things I can tell you about Joseph is this: one day there were some people who came to Jesus and wanted Jesus to give them an unforgettable picture of God -- "What is He really like?" And this is the problem for many people. Not, "Is there a God?" -- that's not the great problem for people. The great problem for some people is, "What's He like?"

...and then with the utmost of reverence and respect, Jesus said, "He's father-like" -- and He never paid Joseph a greater tribute. Nor do we. For there is nothing in that term in His relationship with Joseph that would cause Him to shy away from it, but He had found in His relationship with Joseph all of those fine qualities that He said resembled the nature and character of God.

It's a circle of love, I tell you, into which God saw fit to place His precious Child . . . a circle of love made up of people, among whom was a just man named Joseph.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"CIRCLE OF LOVE: MARY"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

We've entered this day, as you well know, the second week before Christmas. Again now as before I sense something of the wonder of it all. Maybe from a purely human perspective, that's exactly why Christmas remains the favorite of all the holiday seasons. It carries with it a measure of excitement that no other season of the year can match. One doesn't have to be a romantic to be caught up with the wonder which really is Christmas.

I'm wondering if you'll forgive me now as I tell it to you this way, but I never cease to marvel how God accomplishes what He has in mind to do! It's not only that we're startled by the fact that He'll do what He'll do, but particularly so that He'll choose the method by which to accomplish it. Talk about the wonder and the excitement which is Christmas, and God pity the man, whatever his age, who can never be thrilled by the wonder of Christmas. God never did anything quite like it, you know, and essentially it was all His own idea.

Now when you think of Christmas, you can't help but think of certain people, because God, in order to have Christmas accomplished for us, had to use people. Honestly now, I don't know of anything that God ever did accomplish by Himself, except Creation . . . but ever since the moment of Creation, all that He's wanted to do in this world for us He's been able to accomplish as He used people - - either as partners or as tools.

I thoroughly enjoy reading history because I find a measure of delight in seeing how God gets His purpose accomplished by using people. Sometimes they cooperate beautifully....sometimes they even make themselves available to Him,

and say, "Here, Lord, am I -- send me! -- use me!" Sometimes He has to do quite a job of convincing them that they can do what He has in mind -- it may take a bit of doing on His part to get the idea across to them. So whether they volunteer or whether He claims them, they are used as partners.

And then, every now and then He uses them even though they may be unwilling, or they may not be aware of it, and in that sense He uses them as a tool. His purpose always is to be accomplished, and it's always better, of course, for Him and for us, when it's done in a cooperative way, when we make ourselves His willing partners, His obedient servants!

Now that introduces again for us the theme of the four sermons to be preached from the Saint Luke pulpit these Sundays of Advent. The general title is "Circle of Love" -- and you're right in surmising that it deals with the people, the personalities, who were involved in that first Christmas. Because God's preferred method of accomplishing something is by using a person. Last Sunday we talked about a man named Joseph. And today, a woman named Mary, the maid from Nazareth.

There's a text, of course there is -- from the first chapter of the Gospel according to Luke -- you'll recognize the words in the old translation, won't you, some of us still cling to it -- the 46th verse of that first chapter:

"And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the
Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my
Saviour . . . "

It's a bit clearer, honestly it is, more precise, more direct, in today's English Version:

"Mary said, My heart praises the Lord.
My soul is glad because of God my
Savior . . . "

Well, the circle of love....the maid from Nazareth, a woman called Mary.

Tell me honestly, what do you really know about her? The Bible itself is surprisingly skimpy along these lines, it doesn't say too much about her. She

only looms on the horizon quite incidentally. Oh, she makes her debut at the very beginning in this magnificent way....but from that point on she's much in the background. What do you really know about her? I'm going to suggest two things right now. But if you don't mind, before I share them with you I'd love to talk with you a bit about the the Virgin Birth.

You can't possibly think of Mary without thinking of the Virgin Birth, and for some people within the Christian faith this is a stumbling-block -- they refuse to accept the fact of the Virgin Birth. And this causes them no end of trouble....they just can't figure out scientifically how it's possible to have such a thing as a baby born of a woman who had yet to have a sexual relationship with her husband. They can't figure that out. And because they can't figure it out, they don't fully appreciate all that Jesus Christ is. And that's the pity of it.

Now if this can be helpful to you, let me tell you that I myself have wrestled with this. But I've resolved it to my satisfaction, and I hope maybe to yours as well. The Virgin Birth must be seen in its relationship to the totality of all that Jesus Christ was and is. I do not begin with the Virgin Birth - - I end with the Virgin Birth.....which is simply to say I do not believe that Jesus Christ is divine simply because He was born of the Virgin Mary. I would never talk to a man about Jesus Christ and say, "Now in order for you to accept Him as your Lord and Saviour, you've got to begin by accepting the Virgin Birth" - - I'd never begin at that point. I accept the fact of the Virgin Birth because I first accept Jesus Christ. Because I believe in Him I believe in the Virgin Birth. It comes, then, at the end of my faith and not at the beginning, if I put it for you that way.

He was no ordinary mortal. He is the One of whom we say, as the Creeds put it in that timeless fashion - - "Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the father . . . " He is God. And because He is God we can accept the nature of His birth unlike that of any other birth.

I'm telling you, my friend, if you have trouble with this, and you discredit the Virgin Birth, you'll find yourself discrediting the Resurrection... you'll have yourself ruling out the Ascension....you'll have yourself ruling out miracles, period. And when you and I, who are finite, come to think in terms of the infinite - - when you and I, who are mortal, come to think in terms of the divine - - we're in duty bound to deal with miracles, because God is over and above and beyond us. A god who would do things that could always be clearly explained and understood by us mortals wouldn't be much of a god! So when you think of Mary, the mother of our Lord, and you think of the Virgin Birth, don't let it be a stumbling-block for you. Accept it because of who He was, who He is.

Now let me tell you two things about Mary. I am not so sure that we've always done her justice. She's never really gotten her due regard in all of Christendom, and so in a certain sense as I come to the sacred desk I'm about to say: Will the real Mary stand up?

Our Roman Catholic friends, honestly now, have overdone it. They've gone overboard when they've called her --"Mary, Mother of God." They build a cathedral, and consecrate it to the honor and glory of God in the name of -- "Mary, Queen of Heaven." They enshrine her in a magnificent structure, and call it the "Shrine of The Immaculate Conception" . . . but they overdo it. They've gotten to the place where they permit their people to believe, at one time at least, that you don't get to Jesus Christ except as you get through Mary. Oh, you can justify it historically -- there was a certain period in church history when Jesus Christ was presented as a severe, rigid, strict judge, and not very many people had hope of salvation because Christ was going to be as rigid as all that! And then at a certain period in the church's history they said, "Can't we soften this judge a bit? -- can't we get Him to be kindly disposed toward us? - - isn't there some assurance that we can have?" And so the Church

came up with the notion, Why, we'll get to Him through Mary! -- that's what we'll do! Mary will get Him to soften His heart and He won't be the harsh judge....

....that's how it happened. And they overdid it.

Now as far as Protestants are concerned, we've ignored her too long, and we haven't given her the due credit that belongs to her. After all, she was the chosen one. No one on the face of the earth was ever given the preferment that God gave to her! And we Protestants are the poorer because of it, because we've never really brought Mary into proper focus. And that's what I'm about to do in this sermon in your behalf now, if you don't mind -- trying to allow the real Mary to stand up.

And to begin with, I remind you that she came of peasant stock. She was a simple maid -- very few people knew about her outside of her circle of friends and acquaintances....very much unknown. You begin at that point.

What else can I tell you about her as I scan the Scripture? She was absolutely devout and reverent. You catch that as you go back and study the Magnificat -- that great hymn that she sang as her soul was expressing her response to God who had claimed her -- the utmost of reverence and respect for God. So much so that when God saw fit to use her and to lay His claim to her, she could respond with the utmost of sensitivity. And I covet for every single one of us that measure of spiritual sensitivity that can recognize the hand of God and the claim of God upon us. For shame upon us in this our day -- Mary stands in front of us as the unsophisticated, but we are the sophisticated ones, who hardly know what it is to be sensitive to the gracious visitation, the intimations that God is always sending in our direction. I sing the praise of a man who was President of one of our New England universities, who one day said the test of a truly educated man is his willingness, without any degree of embarrassment, to mention the name of God.

This I can tell you about Mary: simple, pure, the peasant girl, spiritually sensitive and devout.

I can also tell you this: she was the kind of person who, when the time came for God to use someone such as she, she was ready. God's preferred method is always the use of people. But we cripple His efforts when we're not ready!

I'm numbered among those who are absolutely convinced that God always is waiting to use somebody, and that somebody is you -- each one of us. God has pre-destined us for noble uses, and even that noble use may be to glorify the common place where you happen to live and to labor, to introduce God to your situation. God is always waiting to find someone that He can use, and that's why perhaps you may be exactly where you are. But what if you would be unwilling, what if you would be unready? How then can God's purpose be accomplished? God always has something wonderful to get done, and like as not to accomplish it He needs you, and He needs me.

Another thing I can tell you about Mary as I bring her in clear focus for you, if you don't mind, is that she was a child of pure, unadulterated faith, who was willing to surrender herself according to God's plan. And when you are willing to surrender yourself according to God's plan, from a human perspective you always engage yourself in a risk. Let me be as straight-forward as I can possibly be now at this point. Did it ever occur to you the risk that Mary took in allowing herself to be used by God, from a purely human perspective?

...the risk that she took in her relationship with her own family, did it ever occur to you how great the risk was -- how would they believe her? Fortunately God raised up Elizabeth, her cousin, who gave her comfort and courage to believe what was happening....

...from the standpoint of strict Jewish morality and religion, do you realize that she ran the risk of being stoned to

death, and being disgraced!

Anyone who surrenders himself to the hand of God always runs a risk. That's the real Mary of Nazareth. She was willing to do it, a child of faith, the recipient of God's gracious favor.

God be praised for her willingness to be used. God rewarded her greatly. She was the one person on the face of the earth, as none other, who took that Baby in her arms, cradled Him, sang Him lullabies, taught Him Scripture...taught Him to pray. I exalt Mary, because every woman who is privileged to exercise the role of motherhood walks in her footsteps. For every birth is a miracle. The coming into this world of every single child is always to be seen as a bit of two people plus God! Mary, mother of our Lord, you deserve to be remembered for what God allowed you to do for His Son.

As I walk away from this pulpit this morning I think of my own mother. The day I laid her to rest, amid the hills of home . . . and as I walked away from that grave it occurred to me as it had never occurred before, that she was the one person, more so than any other person on the face of this earth, who held me in her arms, who sang me to sleep, who taught me as no one else ever did -- she was the first to do it -- the fact of God.

* * * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"CIRCLE OF LOVE: SHEPHERDS"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son
Jesus Christ, our Blessed Lord.
Amen.

Some people think the preaching of a sermon is intended to jolt the congregation. I suggest to you this morning as I stand at the sacred desk, that the sermon you are about to hear first jolted the preacher. And if I had my way I suppose I'd be willing to suggest that maybe I'd much rather listen to this sermon than have to preach it. And I'll tell you why.

I want to talk to you about a group of people to whom God made a very wonderful revelation, and they weren't in church. You see, I'm the one who Sunday by Sunday encourages you to come to church -- I'm the one who has been telling you that God reserves within those walls and walls such as these a blessing that otherwise you would not know if you had not been found present, if you were not within the gathered company -- that God still as of old keeps some things that He will give only to those who mark the path that leads to a holy house. And yet, in the preparation of this sermon, I want to talk to you about some people who got something very special from God, and they were not in church.

Now don't get me wrong. With all the ardor that I can command, with all the strength of my soul, I'll go on to the end of my years encouraging people to come to church, because I do believe that there are some things to be found here, and in a place such as this, that cannot be found anywhere else. Let there be no misunderstanding at that point! But in all honesty I have to tell you that this wonderful revelation came to people who were not in church.

The text is the 8th verse of the 2nd chapter of the Gospel according to

Luke: "And there were shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night, and lo, the angel of the Lord came to them . . "

....there you have it! I can't make the text read in any other way, nor shall I tamper with the sacred page. That's exactly what the Good Book says -- the angel of the Lord came to them, and the angel of the Lord broke the news. They were the ones who heard that God now was going to do something the like of which He had never done before, the like of which would change the history of the world. It was to them that the glad tidings of great joy were announced. How do you account for it?

Well I can tell you several things about them.

But before I do that, I am in duty bound to tell you that no man can completely figure out the mind of God. There is always this gap between God and us, and respectfully so. If you and I could always figure out the mind of God then we would be as equal with God. But human as we are, we offer some kind of speculation, of course we do. And I'm inclined to tell you that maybe one reason why God broke the news to them as He didn't break it to people who went to church -- because it may have been that God wanted to rebuke people who came to church, the kind of people who believe that just in their coming, as they went through the motions, they had done a good thing for God....

.....as though in the heartless way by which hymns are sung --

.....as though in the hypocritical way we profess our creed

and fail to measure up with our conduct --

...God was saying, "For shame upon you -- I'll look elsewhere to break the good news. You're not qualified to receive it." Suppose God would reason that way!

But furthermore, as uncomfortable as it may be, suppose you and I are the ones who give God cause to think that way! It does happen, you know, that some of us may permit ourselves to believe that just because we happen to be here physically, that that's all there is to it.

Well, having said that, let me hasten on to suggest the reasons why I

think the shepherds were able to hear, and while they of all people on the face of the earth were able to discern the good news as the glad tidings were announced - - I think they were spiritually sensitive. You have to begin at that point. God is always trying to break through to us, God is never without witness. There is no place where God cannot be found. God always wants to make His truth known to us, but in order to appreciate that truth, our antenna has to be raised. We have to be alert, we have to be sensitive. Even now it could be that there are some of you who are appreciating this service to a degree that others may not be appreciating it, because you have trained yourselves in a kind of spiritual sensitivity. And it takes a bit of doing sometimes to keep oneself spiritually alert.

I like to think that these shepherds were spiritually sensitive because they had a lot going for them in that direction, and I'll tell you why. While they watched their sheep they had a great deal of time in which to do nothing but think, and think, and think. And much of their thinking was done in a reflective way. They were removed from society....

-- they were out in the fields

-- they were away from the villages

-- they were away from the metropolitan areas --

...they were not caught up in the teeming mass. They were not glued to a desk....they did not have to reach for one telephone call after another...they didn't have to meet deadlines, there were no programs that had to be planned and prepared and then executed - - - any number of things that you and I do that command our time did not command theirs. They had plenty of time to think. And by the silence that came underneath the stars above, they could reflect.

I don't know that you and I have ever really mastered the fine art of thinking, quietly. Sometimes when people come to me in a counseling session

I suggest to them that perhaps they would do well just to go home and be quiet....and they look at me - - to go home and be quiet! They hardly know what that means. Let me tell you that I know whereof I speak. Can you imagine how uncomfortable some of you would feel right now if I would say, for the next fifteen minutes we're going to worship in the Quaker fashion -- nobody will stand up and speak...we won't sing....there will be nothing heard from the organ.....we'll just be quiet.

...please, don't misunderstand me, I don't want to be unkind,

but some of you would be hard-pressed as to how to handle it.....

Oh, I can understand why, we're not geared that way. We want always to be in motion. And one of the things that I smile at sometimes, when I see even people who reach the sunset slope of life, so conditioned are they to motion that they find themselves in a rocking chair!

But these shepherds knew how to be quiet. And when they were quiet, they thought very deeply.

Now it is never enough just to be quiet. You have to have something to think about, something that's solid and steady, that can hold you in good stead. I'm inclined to believe, and maybe I'm reading far more into it than I should, but I'm inclined to think that they had their moments when they remembered the Scriptures that they had been taught in the days of their childhood. If I had my ministry to begin all over again, I'd spend far more time and energy in simply memorizing certain passages of Scripture, and the hymns. If I had my way in this congregation, we'd make it a requirement in Christian Education and the Catechetical Class and the School of Sacred Music that those in their impressionable years would memorize much more than they do.

You know very well, of course you do, how some of you this very day look back and remember something that you'd memorized, some poem in the days of your school, some passage of Scripture, some maxim, some proverb. And just

as you recall it, it holds you in good stead and gives you a measure of peace and strength that otherwise you would not know. When I go back to the community in which I grew up, I almost feel like bowing my head in respect when I go down the street by the school house, and I remember the man who was the principal of that building who insisted that we memorize certain things that continue to hold some of us in good stead.

So these shepherds, I am willing to suggest to you, as they sat and waited during the long watches of the night, they reflected on the great and fundamental truths, especially as they were rooted and grounded in Scripture. That's what helped make them sensitive. It just doesn't happen. An indictment that has to be made against us, and understandably so, is we just haven't mastered the art of being quiet. Centuries before Jesus Christ the Psalmist could say "Be still!"and then it naturally followed that you would know God. God is always wanting to make Himself known to us. God is always sending out gracious intimations toward us. But in order to hear, we need to be made sensitive.

It's interesting how when you read a novel or a play, just one line or a thought can make you feel very warm and kind toward the author. I've always felt very kind and warm toward Bernard Shaw when I remember how in his play called "Joan of Arc" he has the Maid of Orleans being confronted by the Dauphin, and the French Dauphin says to her, "These voices! You're always saying you hear these voices! Why don't I hear these voices?" And she answered magnificently - - "You could -- if you'd listen."

There's another reason I think why the angel came to them - because they were people busy doing something that had to be done. It was a day's work, and they gave themselves to it. They did not shirk their responsibility. The longer I am in the ministry the more I recognize the basic integrity of pleasing God by doing a day's work well, whatever that day's work may be.

Said Martin Luther, "He who stands"- - no, he didn't say that....Martin Luther said that even the shoe repairman, who repairs the shoes honestly and well, does a work as sacred in God's sight as the priest who stands with folded hands before the altar. These shepherds were men who were going about their responsibility, and not shirking it. And this is pleasing in God's sight.

Roland Bainton, God bless him, has done a magnificent thing in going back and gleaning from certain sermons that Martin Luther wrote on a Christmas theme, and incorporated them in his "Luther's Christmas Book." Now for the moment, let me invite your attention to what he is saying about the shepherds...

"And the shepherds returned . . ." Says Luther -- "Why that's wrong! We should correct the passage to read: 'They' -- meaning the shepherds - 'They went back and fasted, they shaved their heads....they went back and they fingered their rosaries'.....No, instead we read: 'The shepherds returned.'" Says Luther, "Where to? Oh, that can't be right! Did they not leave everything and follow Christ? Must not one forsake father, mother, wife and child to be saved? But the Scriptures say plainly that they returned and did exactly the same work as before. They did not despise their service, but they took it up again, just where they left off."

I am happy to tell you that I still believe that God waits to give you certain things within these walls that you might not receive. But wouldn't it be a terrible thing if this was the only place where God could be found? Of course it isn't. Maybe some of us come here together to get a measure of re-orientation, to be sensitized anew, so that an hour from now, when God sees fit to say something to us in a very special way, we may not miss it. Now you think about that for a while . . .

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

"CIRCLE OF LOVE: WISE MEN"

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God
our Father and from His Son Jesus
Christ, our Blessed Lord. Amen.

As delightful a bit of reading as anything I have done in connection with this Christmas season, by way of collateral reading, that is, is a little book entitled "The Greatest Christmas Pageant Ever Held." It's an interesting story of a woman who is called upon to direct the Christmas pageant of a local church. The person who ordinarily has done it has become ill and is flat upon her back. And so she makes do as best she can with her assignment, choosing certain people to take the parts.

It led me to think, of course, of God, the director of all pageantry, of all fact, the assignment that He had for Himself when He chose those first people who portrayed the Christmas story for us -- the choices that He had to make, the people that He deliberately included inside that circle of love -- the parade of personalities of the first Christmas.

You know what we have been doing these Sundays in Advent, we have been thinking about a general theme: "The Circle of Love" and it is a study in personalities of those who were chosen.

Did it ever occur to you what a varied assortment they really are? How different. For a moment, think of them -- different in temperament and personality -- we have a right to believe this....

-- Joseph as an example, as simple, as plain, as down-to-earth-person as you might find...a good man, a craftsman.

I don't think he had much time to do any amount of day-dreaming. How could he? Any man who works with tools knows that you've got to concentrate on the thing at hand. You can't hammer, you can't saw, you can't plane, and let your

mind wander and think on other things. He was just a good man, and honest. And God chose him, and said, "I need you . . . "

-- Mary, as unsophisticated as any person you could find, leading a sheltered life, no doubt, somewhat protected, absolutely chaste...God chose her: "I need you . . . "

-- Last Sunday we talked about the shepherds -- they were removed from the traffic of life, they didn't have much to do with the people who lived in the villages, they seldom came to town by virtue of the nature of their occupation... ..and with some degree of reluctance I told you that it was very seldom they got around to coming to church. They didn't have much time for organized piety as you and I think of religion. But God used them, God chose them . . .

And now the wise men -- shall we call them the lettered ones? -- the learned ones? -- the widely-traveled ones? -- the people who kept their spiritual antenna raised, waiting and watching for some sure and certain sign? How different they were! And yet within the circle of love they all had equal footing.

Well, that's the way love is. Love doesn't think in terms of distance as the world thinks in terms of distance. Love seeks for only one thing: response and trust. And so God used them in that circle of love.

You know, of course you do by this time, that that's one of the things I covet for this congregation. I sit sometimes in the back of the Nave and watch as you come to worship, and since God has given me the privilege to be your Pastor these twenty years, I know a thing or two about some of you. I know something of your situation in life, I know where you come from and where you have been, the forces and factors at work in your life. And surely by this

time I know something of the differences in your personalities. And then I know a measure of joy -- within the shadow of this altar you all stand on common ground -- within this circle of love no one has an edge on anybody else. That's the way it is with God's love....in the face of our variety of personalities and temperaments we're all drawn together, inside the circle of love.

I thoroughly enjoy reminding myself of what happened, I think it was in Calvary Baptist Church, a number of years ago, in the District of Columbia, when the Honorable Charles Evans Hughes -- some of you will see the face and the beard of that man with so much dignity comes to your mind at once....when he was received into the fellowship of that congregation. A small group of people joined the very same day, none of whom could equal his station in life. But the pastor, God bless him, true to the Christian Gospel, said as that group was being received, in whose company now stood the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, as he welcomed them into that parish family, said: "The ground is level at the foot of the cross!" Within the circle of God's love the ground is always level, no matter how different we may be.

And you've got to remember that when you think of the Christmas story. They were different. But by the grace of God they were all found within the circle of love. And that's one of the things that I continually covet for this parish -- that no matter how different our stations in life may be, we're all inside the circle of love. And that's why it's as wonderful as it is.

Now we've talked in turn about each one of them. Today . . . well remember, Joseph....Mary....shepherds. You're right, today it's the wise men. The text readily comes to your mind, the first and second verses of the Gospel according to Matthew, the second chapter:

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the King, behold there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born king of the Jews, for we have seen his star in the east and we have come to worship him."

One of the difficulties that we have with Christmas is also one of the nice things about it. There's a great deal of the romance associated with it, and much of it is poetry and much of it is legend. We've even treated the star as something that automatically glided across Heaven. I'm not so sure that it glided across the Heaven! But we like to think that it did.

We have certain things that we like to think about when we think of the wise men in particular. I can't tell you precisely how many there were. There was a time when we used to say there were twelve, there were twelve of them like the twelve disciples. Well I don't think that's correct, but for a while certain people thoroughly enjoyed believing it and thinking it.

- - well we've gotten the number down to three....I'm not sure there were three. I'll tell you how we got the idea that there might have been three: we talk about gifts, three in number, gold, frankincense and myrrh....and we thought it would be nice to think that each one brought a special gift, and if you had three gifts, then you had to have three bearing gifts.....

We used to say that they were kings. I don't know that they were. And I don't know where we got that idea. And then as we went along, romantically, we gave them names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar.....and then we gave them differences in personality, even their physical features. One was supposed to have been an old man with a beard....another of the kings, the wise men, a young man....one with a high-pitched voice...and another with a deep bass voice. Well, this is the kind of thing we've done to them. Let's forget about all that for the moment and get down to the stark reality of the matter, where the essential truth is to be found.

Who were they? They were men who honestly believed that one day God would break through into his world as He had never broken into His world before.

Historically I can tell you why they believed that. They came from the land of the Medes and the Persians, and there were more Medes than they were Persians, and they were numbered among those who tried to outwit the Persians militarily and intellectually, and politically. And they failed. So they came to the conclusion that only God could save this world, and this world would be saved only by those people who completely committed themselves to God. They began to think in those terms. And they waited. And as they waited they watched -- for some sign from God. Now whenever you think of the wise men, keep that clearly in focus -- they were the ones who waited and they were the ones who watched for what God was about to do.

The tragedy is expressed sometimes in the way Wordsworth put it -- I think it was Wordsworth who said, "God has a few whom He whispers in the ear" -- the tragedy is in allowing ourselves to believe that it's only a few to whom God whispers in the ear. I don't believe that. I believe what God wants to say He wants to say to all of us. The tragedy is that only a few listen, and only a few respond. God doesn't send out His Word exclusively to a limited number of people. In our day and age, what He's making known, thanks to the medium of communication, it's being broadcast to everyone. But only a limited number of people have a way of keeping their antenna up, keeping themselves on the alert. The wise men were numbered among them. And you begin at that point.

They were the ones who were waiting and watching to see what God would do, because they honestly believed that God would do something. I never cease to marvel at the people in this congregation who allow God to become fully operative in their own lives, in the way and the work of this congregation, because they believe that God will be up to something, and they want to be on hand when it happens. But it never just happens. It happens only as God is able to work through those who are sensitive enough to see where He is and what He is doing. And it's always a thrilling thing to see it happen here. But the wise

men were the men who knew that God would and could do something, and they wanted to be there when it happened.

The second thing, it seems to me, is that as soon as they saw the sign they began to act upon it. We have no reason to believe that they dilly-dallied, that they procrastinated - - "If this is it, let's get with it -- today!"

I'm always troubled by people who do see some signs of the Lord...I'm always troubled, and unhappily, when I know that God is breaking through, and they happen to be aware of it, but they allow themselves to believe that something can be paid attention to -- later on! Not now.

Oh, I'll grant you that God deals with eternity, but I also know that those of us who are in this world are pilgrims of the present, and there are certain things that need to be done today in God's name. And if we put them off we lose something. What ought to be done today ought to be done today. I'm not so sure that it's ever quite the same if two weeks from now we go back and try to do what should have been done today.

I had a good friend one time who told me that about my ministry. He said, "Pastor, no matter where you go, no matter how old you become, don't ever forget to pay attention to young people." And then he gave me a rule of thumb: he said, "You can never do for them at 18 what you should have done for them at 10, for what needs to be done for them at 10 needs to be done for them when they are 10." The story might have been entirely different if the wise men would have put off the initial step when they saw the sign of God.

Another thing that impresses me is this: that once they decided to follow, they stuck with it. Any number of people I know are nobly intentioned -- there's no question about it, there's always a grand and a good beginning. But a grand and good beginning is never enough. We have the story of the wise men because they are the ones who stuck to the road - - they're the ones who got there, and they got there only because they kept following. There invariably is the temptation on the part of some of us to rest a bit, to throw ourselves into neutral.

I wish I had the time and the energy to write a critique on the pastoral ministry that I'd like to pass on to some of my younger friends who are coming into the ministry. I'd warn them in this regard: it's very easy to pay attention to those who are young -- we have Sunday Schools that are especially geared for that. It's very easy to pay attention to the senior citizens, because in our day and age we have all kinds of programs designed for senior fellowship. But watch out! I'd say to them, lest you ignore the fact that attention has to be paid to people who are approaching and who are in middle age. For invariably there is the temptation when one reaches middle age to throw himself in neutral, and to think that maybe he has arrived, and that from that point on things just take care of themselves. Well I'm not so sure that things ever just take care of themselves. Somewhere along the line in the journey the wise men may have succumbed to the temptation -- which they didn't -- but the temptation could have been there to just throw themselves in neutral and drift for a while. It's always a dangerous thing to drift -- you can drift off course, you know. It can take a bit of doing to get back on the course.

Somewhere along the line I think they must have attracted other people. Surely there were people who said, "Where are you going? -- what gives? what's this measure of enthusiasm, this certain glow that you have in your eyes? -- what have you seen? -- what do you know that we don't know?"...and surely they kept after them until they told them. And maybe they too got a hint of this thing of following a star and followed with them. But we have no assurance that they arrived. The Bible tells us only about those who completed the journey.

If the years have taught me anything, the years have taught me that in God's plan for a man's life he throws himself in neutral at great peril. You've got to stick to the road. And you've heard me say this before, that's one reason why some of us keep coming back here Sunday after Sunday, for a measure of re-orientation, to get straightened out, to get to the path again. Well, these

are the things I can tell you about the wise men....

- - they kept their spiritual antenna up, they kept themselves alert, and when they saw the sign which they believed would come, they acted decisively, and they continued with determination, they persevered with patience the course which was theirs to run.....

But we remember them today because they are the ones who followed, until they arrived.

Well I look back now at those personalities in that first Christmas, how different they were. But the story would not be complete without each one of them, and how God had to adapt Himself to each set of people. For some He had to set a star shining. For others He had to get an angel chorus together. For one of them He spoke very quietly and softly, through an angel, His special representative. Well, my friend, God is speaking to each of us. He'll adapt Himself to us where we are - - that's the wonderful thing about our God! He's always willing to come to us where we are.

....and that's the supreme truth of the Incarnation:
God humbled Himself, and came to us, where we were,
in order to take us where we ought to be.....

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

There is no holiday season in the entire year when we wax nostalgic as much as at Christmas, for Christmas essentially is a time for remembering, looking back, thinking of Christmases past.

If I were a gambling man, I'd be willing to wager that as we sang the hymn, this hymn before the sermon, that any number of you looked back and remembered other times and other places when these words came from your lips. It takes us all the way back, this memory lane of ours, and for some of us right now we're especially remembering the Christmases of our childhood.

And undoubtedly that is one reason why our parents made as much of Christmas as they did, because they realized that they were fashioning for us the stuff out of which memories are made. For when it is all said and done, a man lives not only for the things that lie ahead, but he's also sustained and strengthened by what has already occurred. Happy indeed is that man whose Christmases past become as a beacon in the night and as a measure of encouragement for all that is yet to transpire.

For myself, I look back and I remember the Christmases in that small town in which I grew up. It was almost ritual for us on Christmas morning, after we had opened our presents, to tear out the house, go out through the door, go across the street to where our friends lived, and then the criss-cross back and forth the street, until we had covered the entire neighborhood. We'd look to see what they got. And as I remember it, there were always two questions that we asked: What did you get? - and - Who gave it to you?

- - two very important questions. What did you get?

Some people are never quite sure what they're going to get. And then after

they've gotten it, some people don't know what to do with it.

I can only tell it to you as I heard it....the boy was a year-and-a-half old, it was his second Christmas. His parents were quite excited about it, naturally, because they knew that when he was a year-and-a-half he would be able to appreciate it in a way that he hadn't appreciated it his first Christmas. What to get him, that might excite him? -- and they in turn, of course, would be excited. Well, they made the decision.

....they spent a great deal of their time wrapping it in a big box, and then eagerly they sat down as he opened the box as best he could, with their assistance, and inside the box, a big shiny red fire engine! They thought he'd be thrilled. You know what happened? He was more fascinated by the box! He could get in and out of it...with a little help he could stand it on end, and then turn it around.....he spent any amount of time, with the box. He really didn't know, you see what was his Christmas present. He got all fouled up with the wrappings, with the trappings.....

There's something of the child in every man's heart, and I suggest to you now, on the strength of that, that sometimes you and I don't quite appreciate what it is that we've really gotten for Christmas. So the question-of-questions remains: What did you really get? Make sure that you understand what the gift really is. It isn't to be found just in the wrappings.

My father came from the land that was part of the world that gave us Christmas. And as an immigrant peddler he would go up and down the part of Pennsylvania dear to our hearts with two suitcases banded from the shoulders by a leather strap, and inside those suitcases he'd carry handkerchiefs and linens and notions. He gradually worked himself up to the place where he was

selling beautiful oriental rugs. It was my lot in life to go with him in my summer vacation, and to drive him around in that old truck of ours.

I remember how in the days of the Depression I was so eager for him to make a sale. But every now and then he wouldn't make a sale, and I'll tell you the reason why. He'd become so trusted and respected by his clientele that occasionally when somebody wanted to buy something he'd refuse to sell it to them, because, he said, "This really doesn't represent you. I don't have anything with me today that really becomes your character, that would honestly represent your love and your devotion....maybe the next time I can come -- wait!" ...and here I was, with bated breath, hoping the sale would be made. But my dad? He was honest enough to say, the gift ought to really represent the basic nature and character of the giver.

I can tell you two things about the gifts you'll be getting, honestly I can. I can tell you one thing, the gift that you get will tell me something about the nature and character of the person who's giving it. We're known by the gifts that we give. And by the same token we're known by the gifts that we received, that is our basic nature and character is reflected by the kind of thing that people think of when they think of us!

What did you get for Christmas? Don't name me the article. Don't name me what's inside the package. Tell me this is what you got for Christmas: pure, unadulterated love, on the part of someone who cared so much to give himself is what you got. If you should get anything less than that you really aren't reading your gift aright.

I say this to you on good authority because when God saw fit to give His gift He gave pure, unadulterated love -- He gave Himself. That tells a great deal about Him. He couldn't give anything less. It tells a great deal about us -- because that's precisely what exactly we need most is love! We can get along in this world without a number of things, but there's this one thing that we can't get along without: we can't get along without God's love.

In company with any number of you I have my moments when I dread the time of Judgment. I, too, one day will breathe my last, I, too, will come to the end of my earthly pilgrimage....and I, too, will stand as you will stand at the bar of Judgment. And all the gross sin that I've committed will be there recorded before I arrive....all the good that I might have done, all the love that I could have shared.....and I shudder at the prospect of Judgment. But I know one thing above all else: He who judges me, He who judges you, is no less than a God of love. And in that moment the thing that I will need more than anything else will be a measure of His love. And thanks be to the gift that we've already received, it will be ours, for He gives Himself.

It's nothing but a legend, of course you'll recognize it as nothing but legend....you won't find it anywhere in the Bible. But there's a story about St. Peter one time, who came upon strange faces in Heaven. He never remembered seeing them pass the gate where he was the keeper. And so he asked himself, how in the world did they get in? And as he went looking of course to discover where the leak was into Heaven, according to the legend, he found Jesus Christ himself, reaching over - - outstretching His hand, and helping one person after another to get in.....a love as great as that, that was willing to stoop and to humble and to give such a measure of gracious assistance. This I most certainly believe.

Two questions: What did you get? - and - Who gave it to you? Let's put it this way, Christmas reminds us that the gift is Jesus Christ: and Christmas reminds us that the giver is no less than God. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son - - He cared so much as to give the very best Himself.

I never tire of reminding some of you about the well-meaning director of youth work who said to some of the young people, it's high time that we begin thinking in terms of other people. We're going to have a regular visitation

schedule, now, to the old people's home, and we'll appoint a committee to devise our procedure and our strategy. We'll be going repeatedly.....and so the committee made the decision among themselves that whenever they went, as they would call on certain people they'd take something with them -- they'd never go empty-handed. And so they went on for two, three, four, five times maybe, and then one time some bright-witted youngster said, "The next time we go, why don't we go without taking anything -- why don't we try just taking ourselves....just giving ourselves?"

Did it ever occur to you that this is what some people want more than anything else -- to receive just a measure of yourself? A week or so ago I made my rounds, visiting the convalescent homes and the nursing centers in which some of our members are found. I was bent on my holy mission, or course I was, walking down this corridor or that one, and as my custom is, when the door is open I would say hello to this person, I'd say hello to that person -- but only as I walked down the corridor....

...and to this very moment I am haunted by the voices I did not hear, but I am sure they must have been raised: "Come on in -- don't just pass by! Don't just say hello! Come on in!"....and in that old-fashioned language: "'Bide a spell....stay with me just for a little bit."

God who is God looked down from Heaven, and He heard the anguished cry of Earth. Whether they realized the anguished cry that they were raising or not, but God interpreted it that way: "Come to us, God -- come yourself! It's You we need."

There's a text for tonight's sermon, it's the 23rd verse of the first chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew: "And his name -- call him Emmanuel, God with us." That's the meaning of Christmas: God-himself-come-to-us. Where WE ARE. Not just to "'bide a bit", but to stay. He's the one who said, "I will never leave you....I will never forsake you....I will always be with you.."

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)

GRACE, Mercy and Peace from God our
Father and from His Son Jesus Christ,
our Blessed Lord. Amen.

For twenty-one years now we have been sending you Saint Luke MESSENGER. It comes without fail each week of the year except during the summer months, surely to find a welcome place into your homes. It wings its way into other parts of the world as well. It is read each week in Africa, in Asia, in Europe, and by some of our neighbors to the north of us, in Canada. The material that's written for Saint Luke MESSENGER is written very carefully, and particularly the material that's chosen occasionally for Page Four.

Some months ago I was absolutely certain in my own mind that we had a real winner, but I was wrong. We didn't get much of a very popular reaction to it - - you may not even remember it yourself, maybe it didn't make that much of an impression with you. But very carefully we had chosen a list of names, and then for the names we had given the meaning associated with those names. It was a kind of subtle gesture on our part, hoping to encourage more people to choose the names for their babies very carefully. For the name that is given to a baby, you see, is associated with that child as long as the child lives. Nothing is more precious to our own ears than the sound of our own name, wouldn't you say? So we suggested, perhaps, in the list of some of the names, as they would read the list they would associate such meanings as:

Dorothy: it means, gift from God

David: it means beloved

Karen: it means pure

Irene: it means peaceful

Shakespeare, you see, was only partly right when he said "What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell as sweet - - " but a rose is something more

than fragrance, you see. He was only partly right.

As you read the pages of the Bible, you're impressed all over again with the fact that Bible people chose their names very carefully, and then hopefully would expect the person to whom the name was given to embody in his life the characteristics and the traits of that name.

God chose names carefully. God was in the position, you see, one time of declaring a name for a particular person. We celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ this night. And Jesus was given a name by His Heavenly Father - - there was to be no question whatsoever what He was to be called. As we read the sacred writings we discover two things regarding his name: His name shall be called Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins - - - and that's why the angel in that marvelous declaration could say, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord." The text for this meditation tonight deals with another name. It's the first chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew, the 23rd verse:

"Thou shall call him Emmanuel - - God with us"

That's the truth that our Heavenly Father wanted to declare in no uncertain way, that God Himself would be with us.

Alvin Rogness has said that when you think of Christmas you must recognize at once that Jesus Christ is the gift, and God is the giver. But I'm sorry to tell you that people don't always see Christmas that way. They don't always recognize the gift as it is in reality, and to make certain that we wouldn't mistake it, God says, "I will give him a name, and recognize him as such when he comes."

The boy was a year-and-a-half, that meant now he was going to get around to his second Christmas. The first Christmas didn't mean too much to him in his infancy. But his parents anticipated his year-and-a-half age at Christmas and they made much of it. They couldn't wait to see him come under the Christmas

tree and be impressed by the lights, the glamor and the glitter of the gifts. They had one for him in particular, and they chose it very carefully, and they wrapped it exceptionally well. They got a great big box with fancy wrapping paper, and then they were all excited to see what he would do with this very special Christmas present. What do you suppose it was? Well you can guess any number of things. Let me tell you at once what it was: a bright, shiny big fire engine.

He unwrapped the present. Much to the dismay of his parents and kinfolk, he put it aside quickly, and became absolutely fascinated by the box. He could crawl in and out of it, you see....he could push it, he could shove it, he could stand it on end. And hour after hour he played with the box. The gift itself was ignored!

I tell you now earnestly, the child remains in the heart of every man and we're guilty of the same error. We too can become fascinated with the trappings which become Christmas, with the wrappings and the fanfare that go with it, and forget all about the gift itself. To make certain that that wouldn't happen, God says, there's a name to be attached to my gift: God -- God-with-us.

Now, are you looking for Him? Are you aware that it's God who is coming to us this Christmas-tide anew? To the everlasting credit of that tiny tot who came when his brother was to be baptized here within the shadow of the altar of Saint Luke, the little family had gathered together....his mother in her own way had impressed upon the child that he was coming to God's House, and that God was going to bless his baby brother. And what do you suppose happened as they waited for the baptismal service to begin? He was heard to say, "When is God going to show up?" At least give him credit! He was expecting God to make His appearance, here and now and in this place! But like as not, when God makes an appearance, He reaches for somebody, He uses a pair of hands, He uses a pair of lips, He uses a man's heart. That's the way God comes to us! That's

the way God shows up! God-with-us, embodied in a person. The theological word for God at this time is Incarnation: God made real, God taking on human form. That's why when we think of Jesus we think in the deathless words of the Creed: "very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father . . . " and He became man -- God-with-us.

We're strange creatures, honestly we are. We have a way of thinking about God showing up in the past, we're fascinated when we read the Bible....we're willing to believe that once upon a time in days gone by God did show up and God did do this, then and there. Or on the other hand, we might think in some time yet to come, in the distant future, that God will come then -- tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and beyond that, it could well be that God will loom upon the horizon. But why can't we believe what God wants us to believe: that He's with us now! His name shall be called Emmanuel: God-with-us.

I'll warn you, my friend, brace yourself. He shows up in unexpected places, at an unexpected time and in an unexpected situation. Barely had we come from prayers in the Chapel of the Grateful Heart when the telephone rang and the message was this: a woman had been admitted to the emergency ward of a nearby hospital -- she'll probably die within the hour. The family is asking for a Lutheran pastor -- could you possibly come?

...I found myself surrounded by strangers, I'd never seen them before. I found myself doing the thing that I was meant to do...I offered a prayer. And as I offered the prayer she breathed her last and was translated immediately into God's nearer presence..... And in that emergency room, surrounded by strangers, I felt God! He was there! -- in the tenderness and devotion of those who kept the vigil.

...I felt His presence this morning, when with a little company of people we laid her to rest, and I saw a grandmother come and reach forth and put her arms around a 6-year old and an 8-year old there in the cemetery.....

He has a way of showing up in unexpected places -- in the arms of a grandmother who assures two kids that God will watch over them and love them and protect them in the years that are yet to come. God with us -- of course! But in unexpected places.

A boy was seen one time, standing in a street corner with a bit of broken mirror glass in his hand. Said the stranger, "What in heaven's name are you doing with that?" He said, "Mister, do you see that room up there in the 4th floor of that building? My sister is flat on her back. She can't get out of bed -- she'll never get out of bed. But I've discovered that at a certain time of the day, if I have this little mirror in my hand, the sun is just right, and I can get that sun to dance back and forth in the ceiling in her room -- that's what I'm doing." God shows up in unexpected places at unexpected times....in a youngster whose devotion like that for his sister who would never get out of bed.

God showed up one night -- we commemorate it this very eve -- in a feeding trough for some animals -- at the end of a lot, behind a second-class inn. Who in the world would ever expect that God would show up there. But He did.....

One cruel night they took some people and put them on a cross. There were three of them hanging there. Who in the world would ever have expected God to show up in the body of a man convicted as a criminal? But He did.....

God was there....some people were walking along a road that leads to Emmaeus. And they were despondent and discouraged, and a stranger came up alongside of them and all of a sudden they said, "Did not our hearts burn within us as He walked with us, and opened to us the Scriptures?" God-with-us! Today. In this world. He has a way of showing up, my friend, in unexpected places.

There was a President of Gettysburg College who was instrumental in seeing built on that campus Christ Chapel. As the building was being constructed, he had occasion to visit with craftsmen and artisans in out-of-way places in Manhattan. One morning he went very early in a section of the city where a man would never go without an escort, day-time or night. And as they were walking

the streets of that dismal section of town, he saw a woman ahead of him, bent over, reaching into the gutter, picking something up and putting it in a gunny-sack. And as only Dr. Hanson could do, he said, "Good woman, I'll give you a dollar if you'll tell me what you're doing and why you're doing it." She said, "You don't have to pay me and I'll tell you what I'm doing -- this isn't a very pleasant neighborhood, mister, the drunks have all gone off the street by this time. There's a lot of fracas here during the night hours. Now that daytime has come, pretty soon this street will be filled with kids and young people, many of them bare-fotted. I'm picking up the bits of broken beer bottles so they won't cut their feet."God has a way of showing up in unexpected places -- in an old woman, bent by the years, picking up broken bits of beer bottles.

His name shall be called -- that's what was told us -- Emmanuel -- God-with-us. Not yesterday -- that's over -- He was there. Tomorrow? Sure -- He'll keep His promise. But I'm here to tell you, He's with us now. Call Him Emmanuel. What's in a name? Everything's in a name. God thought that way. Don't make the mistake, my friend, of failing to see that when He comes He comes in pure unadulterated love. Let me make the suggestion to you -- when you open your presents, don't think simply of the gifts, the gift itself. But think of the motivation that lies behind it. For when God gave the gift of His Son He cared enough to give the very best because He gave Himself.

There was a time in history when God said, as I'd like to think of it, "I hear the anguish of the world -- men's hearts crying out to me: 'You sent us your prophets, you sent us your kings, you sent us your priests! But God, it's high time now that you come yourself, in pure unadulterated love. Come to us perfectly, God'" Whether man cried that way or not, God at least felt that that is the way he should have spoken and God Himself answered the plea of man and God did come. Because the prophet Ezekiel says, "For to us saith

the Lord, Even I, I myself will both come to my people and I will seek them and I will save them." His name shall be called Jesus -- He's the Saviour. His name shall be called Emmanuel because He's with us now.

It's a legend, I tell you, and don't you dare mistake it for Scripture, it's only a legend. But it illustrates a perfectly beautiful truth of Scripture. St. Peter was making his rounds about Heaven, and suddenly it occurred to him that he was seeing faces he had never seen before. He didn't at all remember their coming by the gate that he was keeping. He stroked his long beard and he scratched his white hair -- where do they come from? -- how do they get in? He became a one-man detective crew, and he went looking for the leak into Heaven. (It's only a legend, I tell you)...and he found it. In the back section, leaning over at the risk of His own life, with outstretched hand, there was Jesus Christ himself, helping them to get in. It's only a legend, but it illustrates the truth, my friend. No man ever gets to Heaven by himself. You and I can't earn it, and we don't sometimes desire it.

(take was turned over and some part omitted)

....for Him who is the Judge of all, and have my record played back for me: the good that I might have done that I did not do.....the evil that I did and perpetrated from wicked impulses. And in that moment of Judgment I shall be saved, not because of my merit, but because God comes to me in pure unadulterated love to save me. And therein lies our hope. And the exceedingly precious thing about it is, Christmas is forever.....and that means it's now. Because if it's forever, it can be now.

* * *

(This sermon transcribed as recorded)